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HOSTILITIES ONLY



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A Novel

By

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. AN ACCIDENT	7
II. PANIC	13
III. CATASTROPHE	26
IV. SURVIVORS	35
V. UP THE LINE	42
VI. TUG GOES VISITING	51
VII. A WAR-TIME DANCE	59
VIII. DRAFTED FOREIGN	66
IX. A FRIENDLY PETTY OFFICER	75
X. A FRACAS	85
XI. BUSHED	96
XII. A STEWARD'S REMINISCENCES	110
XIII. SHORE PARTY	117
XIV. NGUNGO FORT	126
XV. THE RETURN OF THE "FOULLA"	137
XVI. A DUST-UP WITH THE 'UNS	141
XVII. SHINER LAST MAN OUT	148
XVIII. CONVALESCENT	153
XIX. WHITEHEAD'S BUNGALOW	159
XX. THE SICK BAY	167
XXI. WARRIORS AT PLAY	174
XXII. TUG IN THE STEAM CUTTER	180
XXIII. PRIZE CREW	197
XXIV. THE MYSTERIOUS TRAMP	210
XXV. HOME AGAIN	221
XXVI. CHATHAM IN WAR-TIME	227
XXVII. THE "CAMBORNE"	240
XXVIII. AN OLD FRIEND AND AN ENTERTAINMENT	253
XXIX. SHINER WRIGHT GOES ASHORE	268
XXX. THE MIDDLE WATCH	276
XXXI. SHINER TAKES A HAND	284

INDEX

1	THE HISTORY OF THE
2	3
4	5
6	7
8	9
10	11
12	13
14	15
16	17
18	19
20	21
22	23
24	25
26	27
28	29
30	31
32	33
34	35
36	37
38	39
40	41
42	43
44	45
46	47
48	49
50	51
52	53
54	55
56	57
58	59
60	61
62	63
64	65
66	67
68	69
70	71
72	73
74	75
76	77
78	79
80	81
82	83
84	85
86	87
88	89
90	91
92	93
94	95
96	97
98	99
100	101

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CHAPTER I

AN ACCIDENT

HIS MAJESTY'S armoured cruiser *Antares*, her engines pounding out a hard nineteen knots, blustered through a choppy sea in a mine-protected area adjoining the north-east coast of Scotland. Astern, the broken waters of her wake swirled and boiled, an irregular lane of flatter and whiter water, to be lost at length in the rolling surges on either side, succumbing, as it were, to their ceaseless assaults. A division of destroyers, strung out in a single line on her port quarter, nosed their swifter way through the white-capped billows, throwing clouds of smoke-like spray over their high fo'c'sles, their tiny bridges, and sometimes over their fore funnels.

The time was a quarter-past four in the afternoon. The watches had just been changed. The engine-room hands off watch had bathed themselves, and were taking their well-earned tea. Second-class Stoker Tug Wilson emerged from the stokers' wash-place, and walked along the mess-deck to his mess—number twenty-five on the starboard side. Grabbing a basin containing a few dregs of tea leavings, he dipped it into a large mess-kettle, half-filled with a strong and stewed concoction brewed some three-quarters of an

hour earlier from a couple of handfuls of excellent tea. Holding his basin of tea, he sidled along the narrow space between two parallel mess-stools, each crowded with eating, arguing or lolling stokers, and found a vacant space, where he hoisted his legs over the stool and sat down.

“Pass the bread, will yer? *And* the jam.”

A stoker sitting near a piece of a loaf and a tin of Tickler’s jam, swept these articles without a word in Tug Wilson’s direction.

“Thanks.”

Tug Wilson was new to the Navy; this was, in fact, his first cruise. The ship had left her base only that afternoon, and Tug had just completed his first watch in the stokehold. His arms ached, and his back ached; but he had stood a fairly hard watch, and, in spite of the prospect of an approaching succession of such watches—the next one would be at eight o’clock that evening—he was, on the whole, rather pleased with himself. Above all, he found to his astonishment that he was not sea-sick.

Tug had taken a large gulp of tea and a few bites of bread-and-jam, when he became conscious that something about the ship had, in a subtle manner, become changed. And it soon appeared that others on this crowded mess-deck had also noticed something unusual, for the noisy buzz of conversation gradually died down to something approaching quietness.

“’Ullo!” somebody said.

“What’s up now?”

The vibration of the ship’s fabric had ceased; the

occasional dull thud of the resisting seas was no longer felt. The engines had stopped.

One or two stokers who were near the ladder climbed up on to the upper deck to seek there the cause of this unexpected happening. Their lead was soon followed by others, so contagious are the promptings of curiosity. By twos and threes they left the mess-deck, until all those who had finished their meal had deserted their messes.

Tug sat almost alone in the mess, munching his bread-and-jam, until he also succumbed to the urge of that all-powerful instinct, and a few moments later his head appeared wonderingly above the coaming of the hatchway.

He found a knot of people gazing seaward from the port side of the ship. Following the direction of their gaze, he saw, at a distance of about three-quarters of a mile from the ship, a stationary destroyer. A faint haze of smoke was ascending from each of her three funnels, to be blown away immediately to leeward. But from the vicinity of her third funnel something besides smoke was ascending; it was a cloud of steam vapour.

"She's the *Lycurgus*," a quartermaster was saying.

"Main steam-pipe," said another. "I pity the poor blighters in the dust'ole."

"A boiler bust," a young O.D. loudly and confidently asserted.

"Don't talk wet," rejoined a young stoker, still more loudly.

There was a slight stir alongside, and a motor-boat splashed away from the ship's side. It lurched away

in the direction of the stationary destroyer, its tarpaulin hood swaying from side to side as the boat rolled and bowed to the seas.

At that moment a sound above Tug's head made him literally jump. It was a loud vibrating roar. Interrupted, punctuated by short-lived silences, then prolonged for a few seconds, it finally ceased as abruptly as it began. Others besides Tug looked suddenly upward in the direction of the noise. The lifting of a safety-valve for a short time, due to the rising steam unused by the inactive engines, had momentarily startled other and older persons than the newly-joined second-class stoker.

Tug stood for a few minutes watching the receding motor-boat, and then he remembered his unfinished tea. His appetite was good, and bread was none too plentiful. Accordingly he went below for another gulp of tea and a bite or two before the mess-cooks cleared away.

Before long he was on deck again, and gaping seaward without any clear idea of what he expected to see. Both vessels were still stationary, and, except that the destroyer was now on the port bow, instead of right abeam—a change due to a slight swing on the part of the cruiser—they still retained their relative positions. The motor-boat was making her return journey. In a few minutes she was close to the ship, and slowing down in order to go alongside. Her appearance was not quite the same as when she left the *Antares*. She now carried a cargo of a sort. One could see, as she rolled in the direction of the ship, bundle-like figures laid out in the stern-sheets.

As the boat was drawing alongside Tug heard a shout from the bridge; it was an order given slowly in a hard baritone voice. He looked up at the bridge. At the extreme end, and looking over the rail, a figure wearing a peaked cap, edged with gold leaves, and four gold stripes on his cuff, was in the act of making a short gesture. It was the captain—he who had shouted the command.

“Aye, aye, sir!” was yelled from the boat’s stern.

The captain turned inboard, and Tug lost sight of him. He reappeared a few moments after striding along the fore-and-aft bridge in the direction of the quarter-deck.

The motor-boat edged slowly alongside, her small propeller making a busy turmoil in the water as the engine was reversed to stop her way. A whip was lowered almost at once; two or three hands dropped nimbly into the boat, and these proceeded rapidly to make the line fast to the first load to be hoisted inboard.

Tug found himself being drawn irresistibly in the direction of the quarter-deck, on the port side of which he could see a large group of officers and lower-deck ratings clustered round the head of the accommodation-ladder. A few moments later he was shoved backward by a burly and bull-voiced ship’s corporal.

“Gangway there. *Gangway!*”

A sick-berth steward came fussily along the deck. Behind him, two seamen and two marines carried a stretcher bearing the first bundle. Swathed in bandages, with cotton-wool poking out here and there,

the figure as it was borne past Tug emitted a thick utterance, half-sigh, half-moan. A close-cropped head, bearing a tuft of curly hair immediately above the forehead, rolled occasionally from side to side, to loll again in the opposite direction. Tug caught a glimpse of a purplish blotched face, streaked with grime. The eyes were closed.

“Poor bleeder!”

It was a stoker standing beside Tug who had spoken. A preposterous phrase; but what a world of compassion was conveyed in the tone in which it was spoken. Unconsciously Tug was swayed by it. That poor figure that they were conveying to the sick-bay must be suffering horribly. The victim of some dire mishap, a stoker like himself; it might have been himself. Tug had scalded himself once a long time ago with a tea-kettle. That was a comparatively trifling affair; but he had not forgotten it.

Three other bundles were brought for'ard. Before the last one had passed to the sick-bay Tug had seen enough. He felt a little unwell as he went below.

The engines of the *Antares* began to throb again. A bos'n's pipe was heard. A slight stir of bustle arose above deck and quietened down again. The affair was finished so far as the ship's company was concerned; the ship routine resumed its normal course.

But in number twenty-five mess Second-class Stoker Wilson sat thoughtfully at the table. A picture continued to thrust itself before his mind. It was a small boiler-room; in it a fog of steamy vapour, and on the plates a number of writhing figures. And in his imagination he heard again the loud roar of escaping steam.

CHAPTER II

PANIC

THINGS were not going too well in number three stokehold. The fireman on number sixteen boiler laid down the slice with a curse, and wiped his forehead and neck with a sponge-cloth. The chief stoker took another look at the steam-pressure gauge; had another tap at the copper pipe underneath. The result, apparently, was not reassuring.

"Leave it for a bit now," he said to the stoker. "Give it a chance. Don't put any more on just yet awhile."

The boiler-room telegraph sounded a brazen "clang". The chief stoker looked at the pointer.

"MORE STEAM."

"More steam! That's all that blinkin' thing can say."

Tug Wilson was busy filling a skid with coal by the bunker entrance. It was a hard watch, harder for the firemen than for Tug, whose job it was to supply them with coal. The demands of the pounding engines were about as much as the sweating occupants of the boiler-room could supply. Above all, the combustion of the coal was not all that they could desire, a state of affairs which necessitated an unusual expenditure of muscular effort, and which resulted in a corresponding output of profanity.

At five bells the firemen became aware of another figure in number three stokehold. The new-comer was the senior engineer-lieutenant. Clad in brown overalls, a soiled service-cap on his head, he stood for a few moments looking at the water-gauge of number sixteen boiler. Then he lifted his hand to the handle of one of the gauge-cocks, and pulled it down with a jerk.

Tug was not aware of the presence of this new visitor to the stokehold. Busy filling, dragging, and tipping these endless loads of coal, he was not conscious of very much beyond an aching back and a strong desire to sit down on a heap of coals.

Suddenly there was a loud, harsh, high-pitched screech behind him—the sound given forth by a vicious spurt of steam.

Immediately Tug's weary limbs forgot their weariness. He gave one startled glance backward at the steaming vapour spreading itself over the floor-plates beside the boiler; and then he dropped his shovel and made a panic-stricken dive for the ladder.

The noise ceased as suddenly as it began.

"Wilson!"

It was the voice of the chief stoker. The tone was that which the chief stoker reserved for special occasions.

"Come down immediately."

Tug had got to about the fourth rung from the bottom. The command, the cessation of the steam noise—it was chiefly the latter—made him pause and look back. He dropped once more to the plates.

The figures in the stokehold had not moved. They

were all looking at him. Leggatt, the fireman of number sixteen, let loose a braying laugh. "Haw, haw, haw."

"Dry up Leggatt," said the chief stoker.

The engineer walked slowly up to Tug, and deliberately looked him up and down; then he fastened his eyes on Tug's frightened countenance. It was a most severe expression that he directed towards the second-class stoker.

"What's your name?"

"Wilson, sir."

"How long have you been in the Navy?"

"Four months, sir."

The engineer turned to the chief stoker.

"How long has this man been in the ship?"

"About a week, sir. 'E joined the ship a week ago."

"This is your first ship?"

"Yes, sir."

The engineer took a deep breath, and delivered himself with impressive severity.

"Now understand. We're at war. You know that. When you're on watch here, you stay here till you get orders to go. If the ship is sinking under your feet, if the stokehold is flooded with water, if the boiler blows up—you stay here. Unless you get orders to go. Do you understand? And if you try to run away—if I see you trying to run away—I'll shoot you like a dog. Like a dog. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Bear that carefully in mind." Then, to the chief

stoker: "Let me know at once if this man tries to run away again, or if he's absent from his post without leave."

The engineer, feeling thoroughly satisfied with himself, departed for the engine-room.

"Come on, my son; get some more coal," said the chief stoker. "You can't bunk away 'ere, y'know."

The other stokers eyed Tug as they would have eyed an Eskimo.

"Ain't you never seed a gauge-glass blowed down before?" Leggatt asked him. "You thought the boiler'd bust. Haw, haw. You wouldn't run fur if the boiler bust. Not you; nor no one else 'ere."

Tug returned to his skid, and started shovelling. This was his first encounter with the engineer officer, and he felt as if some tragedy had overtaken him. That cursed steam blowing out had shaken him all up. It was all nothing, apparently. He had shown up pretty badly, anyway. For the remainder of the watch he went about his job like one in a dream. He was unconscious even of his excessive weariness until, the watch over, he found it was as much as he could do to climb the ladder.

It is probable that Tug would have heard nothing more about his unfortunate panic if Leggatt, his watch-mate, had not made it his business to proclaim the fact loudly to all the stokers on the mess-deck who cared to listen. The next day at dinner-time it was the only theme of his conversation.

"The bloke came in an' blew down a gauge-glass, an' Tug Wilson bunked for the upper-deck."

After one or two amused comments on the part

of the other men the subject would have been allowed to drop, but Leggatt would not let it drop. He continued to harp on it, until one of his mess-mates—no particular friend of his, be it said—exhorted him to “shove a sock in it, for Christ’s sake”. In the circumstances it was not surprising that before very long there was not a member of the ship’s complement of stokers who was not aware of the occurrence of the previous evening.

“Bunked for the upper-deck?” loudly ejaculated a long, lean, sinewy stoker. “So would I, you bet. I’d bunk out of it for good if I could, when the guns begin to go off. I’m not stoppin’ ’ere. Not this kid. It’s dangerous.”

“Take my tip,” he said to Tug. “When you ’ear anything go bang, you ’op it for the mast’ead. It’s the on’y safe place in the ship.”

“Shut up, Shorty,” a little fat stoker interrupted. “You wouldn’t want to go up the mast’ead. Just stand on yer tip-toe an’ you’d be there already.”

After dinner Tug climbed on to the upper deck, and leaned against the lee-side of the steel conning-tower. After several attempts he succeeded in lighting a cigarette, and he proceeded to get from it such solace as he could while he gazed moodily over the wind-swept waters, and engaged in a somewhat sombre introspection. His mental horizon had become unmistakably darkened. The son of a news-agent in a small way of business, who kept a shop in a side street in Dalston, Ernest Wilson had for many years nursed a secret longing for a nautical career. After leaving the council school at the age

of fourteen, he had been compelled by the rather poor circumstances of his family to find a job of any sort. No considerations of ultimate success in life, alas! found any place in the scheme of his present or prospective employment. The first and last objects of his seeking work were to obtain sufficient money for his support, and to aid the none too thriving condition of his father and younger sister; mother he had none. A few blind-alley jobs he got; and then the War came along, and there was no longer any future; nothing but an all-absorbing present.

But the War had presented him with a situation that peace-time could never give him. It was not long before the British Navy wanted men—seamen, if possible, but if these were not to be had, well then, landsmen. Men, and more men, were required; ships and then more ships; all kinds of ships for all kinds of purposes; stately liners and dapper yachts; worn-out cruisers and lumbering tramps; and then newer and stranger craft for hitherto unimagined purposes. And the men to man them; men and more men were wanted. Was ever such an armament created for sea warfare in the history of the world?

And so this new sea force demanded this unprecedented quota of men—aye, and landsmen. Here was the chance of the newsagent's son to test that life on the ocean wave after which he had so often hankered without committing himself to the twelve years of servitude which the peace-time service demanded.

Thus, at the age of nineteen, he had come to join the Navy—as a stoker. He might have joined as an

ordinary seaman; he would much have liked to. But the higher rate of pay—it was sixpence a day more in those days—was a consideration that he could not afford to pass over. Furthermore, an optimistic and all-too-persuasive marine recruiting-sergeant had practically settled his future for him. (Stokers were badly needed at that time.)

“Why,” this optimist had told him, “you’ll be a first-class stoker in less than a month. That’s two and a penny a day. Then you become a killick. That’s a leading ’and. After that a P.O.; p’raps in a year altogether. Or maybe a little longer.” And so on. It is an old, old story, which every old soldier and sailor knows like his alphabet. Anyhow, it clinched the matter. Ernest Wilson became a second-class stoker, acquired the nickname of Tug,* and in due course found himself in a ship at sea.

It must be confessed that life afloat, as he found it, was little like anything he had imagined in the vague and broken soliloquies with which he had so often beguiled his odd moments in the past. In those pleasing reveries he had always pictured tropical seas and white drill suits—himself invariably clad in the latter—and round his waist a *sash*. He would picture himself holding a rope’s end. The ship always had cream-white timbers, and a cleanly hold smelling of palm oil and copra. (Wilson did not know what palm oil and copra smelt like, but somehow it all sounded good.) There was also a visible, and not too distant, shore, where palm trees and other exotic vegetation grew. And the cuddy where he

*In the Navy all Wilsons are called by the appellation “Tug”.

slept and took his meals was a delightful place; something between the interior of a caravan and an over-clean summer-house. (Sailors were always clean; that was a part of the religion of the sea.)

No; the life turned out to be nothing at all like that. For his quarters on the ship there was the crowded mess-deck, rasped clean for inspection times, but unspeakably filthy at all other times; a living-space where there was barely room to move about without cannoning into a truculent and blaspheming neighbour. In place of the languid hauling of a rope's end there was the monotonous and fatiguing labour of the shovel. And as an everlasting accompaniment to it all, there were the greasy and unromantic machinery, the dirty fire-irons, the coal dust, and the soot.

Exotic vegetation!

Tug had joined the *Antares* one dark night about a week previously, and from that moment his life had been one breathless round of heavy labour, mess duties, quarters, and cleaning, intermingled with short intervals of broken but heavy slumber. Days and nights no longer counted; time was marked by watches. For him it was not Thursday night nor Friday morning; it was the middle watch. But time sped on at wondrous speed, and before he had realized it a week had gone by.

With his shipmates he had passed muster tolerably well. He was a trier, and that fact went a long way with them. Regarding his attitude towards them, Tug had sufficient force of character to disapprove of much that he observed. Though by no means free

himself from the habit of swearing, he did not think it worth while to imitate his brethren of the lower-deck in their unspeakably foul language. The attitude of some of his shipmates towards women, as evidenced by their conversation, also did not commend itself to him. About women he had practically no ideas at all. He had been taught to lift his hat to them. Also he must always offer his seat if he saw a lady standing. Generally he had to be considerate and polite to all members of the opposite sex.

All this implied that women were in some way superior to men, though obviously frailer; and he had always been content to accept that view, and to act in accordance with it. Tug was just a well-intentioned Cockney of the lower or lower middle-class, such as one may find in tens of thousands in the inner suburbs, with no very remarkable characteristics, save a simple desire to behave himself. Such a person was not likely to be favourably impressed by the disgusting talk that he heard around him; still less was he likely to be influenced by it.

But these matters, it must be said, formed a very unimportant part of his outlook and appreciation of life afloat. This life, in spite of its unromantic colouring, was altogether too large; it was too exacting to have its course noticeably affected by such trifling basenesses as he encountered every day. In truth he had little time for reflection on such matters. His chief concern was how to get through those terrific watches without displaying to his watch-mates, and, above all, to the lynx-eyed chief stoker—the king of his world until yesterday—the least inability to

stand what was to him a formidable strain. And until yesterday he had succeeded admirably. He was, in fact, doing splendidly until that infernal steam-cock had opened, and a blast of steam vapour had obliterated a tolerably bright outlook. That business would take some living down. Would he ever live it down?

His reverie was suddenly interrupted. A heavy hand had touched his arm.

"Got a light, Towney?"

Tug jerked himself round sharply. A very thick-set stoker was standing beside him.

"Yes. Here you are."

He passed over a box of matches, which the stoker took without a word. With a dexterity born of long practice he lit a very short and very brown clay pipe at the first attempt, despite the rush of wind around them, which no amount of shelter seemed to diminish. As he returned the box he nodded by way of thanks.

Chris Aitken was a first-class stoker of middle-age. He was a Fleet reservist, that is, a man-of-war's man who had completed his service time in the Navy and gone on the Reserve. He had been called up for service owing to the War.

Aitken did not move away, but stood puffing hard at his clay for a minute or two. Then, with his pipe still in his mouth, he said:

"You ain't bound to take all that Leggatt says."

Tug looked at him interrogatively.

"You needn't be afraid of 'im. No. Nor a few more of 'em that I could tell yer of. As fer that there blow down; you needn't let that worry yer."

Aitken nodded at him.

"You ain't the first that's been scared by that," he said. "Some o' them blokes there are bloody good 'ands; but I could tell ye something about one or two of 'em. And Leggatt, too. 'E's a good lad with 'is gate. I've seen the time when 'e's sat down on a skid in the dust'ole an' *cried*."

Aitken nodded once or twice to emphasize the force of his communication. Then he moved away without another word.

Tug had not spoken to Aitken before, although his appearance was by now quite familiar to him. His words on this occasion cheered the young second-class stoker amazingly. So other men of the ship's company had been scared besides him. The next time . . . As for Leggatt; come to think of it, he had had about enough of Leggatt and his gate. With a much lighter heart Tug went below to get an hour or two of sleep or "kip down" in some quiet corner before taking his next watch.

That evening in number three stokehold Tug went about his job of passing skids of coal from the bunker to the boilers with a right good will. Neither of the firemen had just reason to complain of the quantity of coal with which he supplied them. But Leggatt, the man attending number sixteen boiler, took it into his head to attempt a little man-driving for Tug's special benefit. Seeing that the coal-trimmer was a second-class stoker who had already fallen from grace, so to speak, what could be more attractive to his mean and venomous nature than to rub it in to the extreme limit? Therefore, selecting

a moment when the chief stoker's attention was otherwise engaged, he slung on the fire as much of the coal as he dared without risking a heavy reproof, and then sidled up to Tug with a truculent air.

"Am I goin' ter git any more coal this watch, or what d'ye reckon you're down 'ere for? Can't I git any coal without bringing me bloody mouth to bear every time?"

Tug was more than a little taken aback by this impudent address. Coming from such a person it had the effect of rousing his anger to such an extent that he found it difficult to make any reply. He just straightened himself, stood upright, and looked at Leggatt in angry amazement.

Leggatt, unluckily for himself, did not stop here.

"Come on, old Windy Dick——"

He got no further. Without saying a word, Tug just clenched his right fist, and hit him as hard as he could on the mouth. Leggatt staggered backward. Then he placed the back of his hand to his mouth, drew it away again, and looked at it. Yes; there was no doubt about it; his mouth was bloody right enough. To say that he was amazed is to put it lightly. For a few moments he was struck dumb. Then a flood of loud and filthy profanity burst from him, a torrent of obscenity in which monotonous repetition was an outstanding feature. The noise aroused the attention of the chief stoker, who was engaged in examining the action of a feed-pump on the opposite side of the stokehold.

"What's up with you, Leggatt?" he called across. And then perceiving that the engineer commander

had just descended the ladder, he added with a most pompous assertion of authority.

"That'll do, Leggatt. Just modify your language a bit."

Following the engineer commander there came an engine-room artificer. Together they proceeded to the feed-pump that had already been the object of the chief stoker's regard, and a consultation of considerable duration was held over it. Leggatt returned to his boiler, and Tug returned to his bunker. While engaged on his job Tug wondered what would be the upshot of his affair with Leggatt. That he would have to fight him he felt fairly sure. But, although his anger with the man had now cooled down, he was resolved to see the matter through whatever came of it. He was as big and, so far as he could tell, as strong as his opponent; and he really did not see why the other should have it all his own way. And on the top of it all he remembered Aitken's rather pointed advice that he was "not bound to take all that Leggatt says".

As a matter of fact Tug need not have concerned himself any more about the matter at all. The engineer departed from the stokehold; the chief stoker frequently left them to themselves; but nothing happened. Leggatt did nothing, and never said another word. When the watch was over, and the stokers climbed the ladder to the wash-place, Leggatt made no further allusion of any kind to the affair in the stokehold.

"Sure," thought Tug, "I've finished with him."

CHAPTER III

CATASTROPHE

FOLLOWING on the termination of his affair with Leggatt, Tug's outlook became noticeably brighter. By this time he had become shaken down to the machine-like routine and monotonous rounds of watches which made up his life in the ship.

Throughout this time, and the succeeding weeks, the *Antares* maintained her ceaseless watch over the northern approaches from the Atlantic Ocean. Through a wide radius, from Cape Wrath to the far-away coast of Norway, she ploughed the seas in a tireless patrol. Periodically she returned to the grand base at Scapa Flow to coal ship, and occasionally to take in stores. A few days only she spent thus in harbour, and then away once more to her solitary cruise of the northern seas. Ships occasionally were sighted. More than once suspicious circumstances decided the captain to institute a close overhaul. Once the unsatisfactory result of a penetrating scrutiny led him to send a doubtful foreigner back a prize to his base. These incidents, together with the periodical returns to harbour for coaling, formed the only breaks in the monotony of their duties.

In these cruises Tug got more or less used to the Navy and its ways. In the stokehold he kept watch after watch, and the time passed almost unnoticed

over his head. Day after day, week after week, month after month, the long summer days of the northern latitudes gradually got shorter with the approach of the equinox. Autumn arrived, with its lowered sun, and the prospect of the dark and cheerless winter nights began to loom up ahead.

But already there began to float round the messes whispers of that most cheering of all words to the man-of-war's man on patrol duty, the magic word "refit". Continuous service at sea was beginning to tell on the fighting efficiency of the cruiser. Her engines, it was said by those who ought to know, needed a thorough overhaul. The ship's bottom needed a thorough clean. And so the bright prospect of a term of leave heartened the sea-weary mariners, and lent to them a gaiety to which most of them had long been strangers. Before long the vague rumours began to take a definite shape, and at length a date was actually fixed for the great event, a pronouncement which had for its source the unimpeachable authority of the ship's office.

As Tug was in the same watch as the veteran stoker Aitken, he saw a good deal of him when off duty. The lee-side of the conning-tower was Aitken's favourite spot, and there he often went for a smoke when he had half an hour to spare. He was not ordinarily a very talkative person, and he had little communication at any time with his shipmates in general. His rather gloomy countenance and general air of reticence were not characteristics that make one popular in a ship, and, moreover, the manner in

which he received any friendly advances was not such as to encourage their repetition. Consequently the men left him pretty much to himself. They had a sufficient respect for him, none the less. He was highly competent at his own job, and it was pretty well-known that he was thoroughly able to take care of himself. It must be said that if the stokers had a notable respect for him, he, on the other hand, had a most outspoken contempt for a good many of them, a contempt which, it need hardly be said, was a trifle undeserved; and when, as did sometimes happen, one of them failed, he did not hesitate to express his views on the general shortcomings of that person in the most uncompromising terms.

To Tug, for some inexplicable reason, he unbent to a remarkable degree, and after a time he displayed such a regard for him that he sometimes even went out of his way to seek his company. In the course of their conversation he told Tug a good deal about his past history and experiences. They were sufficiently varied, although begotten wholly on the sea. Both in the Navy and the Merchant Service he had seen a great deal. From a youth he had spent practically his whole life in ships. In the Mercantile Marine he had changed about from the stokehold to the upper-deck, or vice versa, as his opportunities, his interests, or his fancy directed, for he was equally competent as a fireman, an engine-room hand, or an A.B. For a couple of years, say, he would be a quartermaster in a lascar-manned Indiaman. On getting his discharge from this ship he would sign on as a fireman in a British coaster. Then, perhaps,

he would be a donkeyman in a tramp, or an A.B. in a wind-jammer.

Tug learned a good many facts that loomed rather important in the minds of merchant sailors.

“It may ’appen,” said Aitken to him, as they were chatting one evening, “that after you’ve spent two years in a tramp, you may ’ave the luck to find yerself in a Burmese port, or some other Gawd-for-saken lo—cality. Then’s the time to go an’ see the old man an’ demand yer discharge. ’Cos after two years in a ship ’e’s got to give it yer, an’ pay yer passage ’ome; that’s Board o’ Trade, that is; an’ ’e can’t get out of it. Well, then, what does ’e do? ’E can’t man a ship afresh from there. Well, then, you can sign on afresh, says you. Of course you can; but not at the old rate of pay. ’E pulls a long face, an’ says sailormen are a graspin’ lot of inshore sharks, an’ no good at that; but ’e ’as to toe the line. An’ you picks up a nice little wad at the end o’ the voyage.”

After hearing so much about the lengthy periods which he spent afloat, Tug was not a little surprised to learn that Aitken was married. In a moment of extreme communicativeness he told Tug that his “old gal was a woman in a million”. At odd times he talked a very, very little about his wife, and, although on one occasion Tug learned that she had socked him over the ear with a saucepan, his references to her were never couched in terms other than the most extravagant praise.

Practically the whole of this time Tug was trimming coal in the stokehold. Only once he had a

momentous chance. A fireman in number one stokehold suddenly went sick, and a necessary change about in the personnel of the boiler-room resulted in Tug being placed in charge of a boiler. It proved a notable change from his ordinary job of coal-trimming, and, although it lasted only for three watches before the return of the sick stoker to duty restored the *status quo*, it was an experience that gave him something to think about for a considerable time.

Unfortunately for him he was put in a watch directed by a stoker petty officer who was, what is comparatively rare in the black squad in the British Navy, a thoroughly mean and detestable scoundrel. He was a man-driver of the very worst type, a fault-finding bully, who rarely gave his man as much as a hint beforehand of what he expected him to do, but rather preferred him to go wrong merely for the pleasure it gave him to drop upon him afterwards. He had other and worse characteristics. For no obvious reason he would take a tremendous dislike to a man, and then woe betide that person. The best thing that could happen to him would be to get a sufficiently bad burn or some other accident that would enable him to go sick, and thus get out of the watch. To work under Petty Officer Blake was to spend four hours of laboured misery. Tug had the misfortune during the time he kept watch on the boiler in number one stokehold to be a misfit in the eyes of this unpleasing character. Needless to say his firing was a failure all through. He never got a chance. The *Antares* was a hard ship for the firemen at the best of times, and her laboured engines during

these cruises imposed an especial burden on the stokehold hands. They needed nothing extra from a trouble-making taskmaster. The petty officer watched Tug from the start; eyed him maliciously as his well-tried efforts resulted at first in a somewhat disordered fire. And then for the remainder of the watch it was:

"Get down the slice, my son."

"There you are; I thought so. You've made a complete bloody mess of it."

"Put the bleed'n rake through it."

"Not that way."

"'Ere, gimme the rake, ye useless 'ore."

"Get down the slice an' give it another dig."

And so on.

Tug learned what it was to keep a really hard watch, that is, one in which the slice and the rake had predominance over the shovel. At the close of each watch he was completely exhausted, and many a time it required the exercise of all his will-power to prevent him dropping the slice and leaning against the bulkhead and damning the consequences. It was no small relief to get back to his coal-trimming in number three stokehold.

Early in October the *Antares* left Scapa Flow on an entirely new course. Her destination was Chatham Dockyard. The long-wished-for refit, with its consequent spell of leave, was now only a couple of days ahead. The prospect of the near termination of their labours aroused a feeling of intense gaiety among all hands. Men who had not spoken to each other for weeks were to be seen hobnobbing like old and tried

cronies. At tea-time on the second day out Tug's erstwhile enemy, Leggatt, in a great emotional outburst, offered him the remains of a tin of salmon, which Tug, although he had already eaten to repletion, accepted with the most touching signs of gratitude.

"We'll be berthed afore this time to-morrow," said Leggatt.

"Sure we will," replied Tug, nodding a violent acquiescence.

"I guess I'll give my pusher the time of 'er life." Leggatt's eyes shone with the anticipation of the time he would have. "What about you? Got a pusher, eh?"

"No. Not much in my line," replied Tug.

"Gahn. What're yer givin' us? You ain't gunna tell me. You're one o' them deep 'uns. 'Arry Elms; 'e didn't go in fer 'em, neither. You know old 'Arry? No; that's right; 'e was 'fore your time. No; 'e didn't go in fer 'em; not 'im. But 'e comes back done in up to the eyes last leave. 'E's in the P.G. now."

On deck that afternoon the weather was beautiful. A fresh breeze from the south-west threw up white horses on the crests of the waves. The sky was a chequered blue, and the sun was sinking behind a bank of clouds far back on the starboard quarter in the direction of the distant Northumbrian coast as the ship plunged her way in a south-easterly direction through the North Sea. The First Dog Watch was drawing to an end. On deck the guns' crews in clusters behind their guns expectantly awaited their

reliefs. On the mess-decks the watch reliefs hastily completed the various personal jobs on which they were engaged—a letter written here, a patch sewn on a pair of fearnought trousers there—and stowed away their belongings as the time drew near for the short two hours' work, or stand by, whichever their particular class of duty required of them. In the stokeholds the clanging of shovels, which had hardly ceased throughout the watch, was now, if anything, more in evidence than ever, as the watchkeepers laboured to give their reliefs a good start with extra large and heavy fires.

The chief stoker in charge of the boiler-room watch glanced at a fire here and there, noted with satisfaction the rising steam pressure, and cracked an oft-repeated joke with the firemen. The firemen wiped the sweat from their faces and necks and grinned. They had heard the joke many times before, but coming from the chief dustman it had a new flavour. The trimmers tipped their last skids of coal before the furnace doors and shook off what they could of the coal dust from their fearnoughts.

Less than half a mile from this floating, speeding hive, another, a smaller hive floated, but this one was submerged a short distance below the waves. But though it was invisible to the crew of the *Antares*, there were people in this small submerged vessel who were watching the *Antares*, watching it with an intense and calculating stare.

In a small confined space Kapitän-Leutnant Kastner was gazing hard through a periscope. His gaze was concentrated, and the object at which he

gazed was a small mirrored outline of the *Antares*. Motionless and emotionless he stood watching the big ship as it plunged on in a straight course, watching and waiting for it to reach a certain point in the sea somewhere ahead. A few silent and portentous minutes passed, and then:

“So,” he said at last.

“That’ll do,” said the chief stoker. “Save that up for the Middle. I ’ear they’re goin’ to splice the main brace to-night. Reminds me o’ when I was in the——”

Crash!

There is no word to describe that catastrophic roar. The small world of the stokehold pivoted upward and outward from the starboard side. The electric-lights flickered and went out. Floorplates buckled, bulkheads were rent and bent, chunks of coal were catapulted across the stokehold. There was a grating roar of imprisoned steam surging forth to fill the ever-lessening space, a rush of black, swirling waters, and then, silence.

CHAPTER IV

SURVIVORS

TUG WILSON hastily pulled tight the cord of his kitbag and lifted it to thrust it into the rack. It was very near to four bells and he had to keep the Last Dog Watch. The bag was about half-way in the rack, he was giving it a final shove, when his feet suddenly gave way and he found himself sprawling on his knees. There was a mighty thud. The deck under his feet was lifted and shaken. The bag swayed for a moment as if undecided what to do, and then fell out and flopped on his back, flattening him out on the deck.

He rose to his feet and staggered away from the bag rack. Then something caught him a heavy blow behind the ear. It was an iron cap box which had become dislodged from its stand somewhere above his head. He raised his hand to rub the injured part. His fingers felt wet. There was a warm drip, drip on his neck.

Utterly bewildered by this succession of unexpected calamities, bruised and stunned, Tug lurched towards the ladder and sat down on one of the steps. For a few moments he had only the vaguest idea of where he was or what was going on. Above his head he thought he heard the tramping of hurried footsteps. Faintly, at some distance away, a bugle

brayed. A little later he thought he heard the faint quavering pipe of the bos'n's whistle.

And then with almost panic force there came to him the recollection that he was due to go on watch. Yes; he had the Last Dog to keep. Why was he sitting here, down in the bag-flat, as if any old time would do?

"Let me know if this man is absent from his post without leave." The words of the senior engineer-lieutenant, spoken many months ago, came abruptly to his mind.

He stumbled unsteadily up the ladder and climbed over the coaming of the small hatch. The mess-deck seemed strangely deserted. It looked as if it had a slight slope to the port. Smashed crockery lay about the deck. Perhaps the ship was in action. That bugle he had heard must have been the call to Action Stations. Well, he was a watchkeeper. His station was in Number 3 Stokehold.

He made his way to the stokers' wash-place. That, too, was deserted. He must be late—a good deal late. Hurriedly but clumsily, with ineffectual speed, he got out his stokehold gear from his locker. Hastily he changed and stepped towards the ladder. The floor of the wash-place was sloping at a bigger angle than when he entered it; he found his shoulder scraping against the side of the doorway, although one of his feet was unaccountably touching the opposite side. This was very strange; he must surely be ill. No matter; he must go on watch. Perhaps the chief stoker would order him to the sick bay.

He looked down the ladder towards the stokehold.

It was strangely quiet and dark down there. The lamps had gone out. Something must be wrong. The ladder seemed to be pitched at an unusual angle. A strange gurgling swash below caught his ear. Something *was* wrong; it was all wrong. Why that blackness and that sinister gurgling down there?

He had better clear out of it. He stepped away from the ladder.

No.

"If you try to run away . . . I'll shoot you like a dog."

He hesitated. If only there was someone to tell him what to do.

At that moment he heard the clatter of running footsteps outside. Someone was coming along the mess-deck in a tremendous hurry. The runner stopped near the door of the wash-place. There was a bang and a clatter on a mess table. The person, whoever it was, had dropped a ditty box; at least, that was what the noise sounded like. Tug went to the doorway and peeped out. The man was Chris Aitken. He had his ditty box under his arm and was hastily rummaging through the contents of an open cap box. At last he took from it what he wanted, and, leaving it open on the mess table, he turned to hurry away. As he did so he caught sight of Tug and stopped.

"What the 'ell are you doin' there, you bloody fool?" he shouted. "'Op it quick."

Tug came out on the mess-deck.

"Why, what's up?" he inquired.

"What's up! What's up with *you*? Come along,

if you want to get out of it. We've struck a mouldy. That's what's up."

By the time they got to the upper deck the list had become very considerable. Tug looked up and saw the great funnels leaning over towards the side of the ship at a noticeable angle from the vertical, a sight which is, somehow, one of the most terrifying of all the aspects of a sinking ship. The hands were mustered along both sides of the battery as at evening quarters. All were preserving an almost complete silence. Tug and Aitken fell in with the stokers' division on the starboard side.

What were they waiting for? What was going to happen next? With a heavy heart Tug looked at the long lines of waiting men. How many were going to be saved out of that great crowd? There were not boats enough to take a tenth part of them. As for Tug, he couldn't even swim. Searchingly his glance wandered to the upper works of the ship, where was stowed much of the boat gear, and where the carpenters and armourers improvised their shops. A spar or two, or a loose grating, perhaps. . . .

"She'll be alongside in a couple o' minutes."

It was a leading stoker standing close to Tug who spoke. His face was turned towards the starboard quarter. Eagerly Tug's eyes looked in the same direction, and the rather heavy load that had begun to settle on his heart lightened like magic. A few hundred yards away and approaching with all the speed of which it was capable was a small steamer that looked like a fishing-boat. Here was a chance, then; a rescuer was at hand. Suddenly he heard a

suppressed cheer from the other side of the battery. He jerked his head round, and there he saw the top of a sloping mast gliding slowly past. Another rescuer; a chance for everybody. There was no need for him to hunt for gratings and spars, after all; no necessity, apparently, even to get wet. Those two small vessels might take off the whole of the ship's company, barring accidents. Barring accidents! Tug remembered the fate of the *Hogue* and *Cressy*, which had all too kindly stayed for the purpose of rescuing the people from the *Aboukir*, only to be torpedoed and sent to the bottom in their turn. The recollection rather damped the fire of hopeful anticipation which the sight of the approaching trawlers had lighted within him.

Tug could see nothing else that was happening. The trawler that he had first sighted passed out of view as it went round the stern of the cruiser to get to the port side. It was from the port side, evidently, that the transfer of the ship's company was to be effected. In a fidget of expectancy Tug awaited the order to move. The minutes seemed like hours. The engineers stood in front of the ranks of stokers quietly conversing together. The hands spoke little to each other; mostly they contented themselves with craning their necks and twisting their heads about in all directions in order to get a view of all that was going on.

All at once another vessel entered their range of vision. This one was a destroyer; but it was not approaching the *Antares*. At high speed it glided past at a distance of about a third of a mile away.

Following a curved course it made a circle round the ship and reappeared again a few minutes later gliding by at undiminished speed. Again Tug's spirits went up. Here was a good protector against another submarine assault.

At last the order came for the stokers' division to move round to the port side. The two trawlers were both alongside, their masts and funnels swinging ever so slightly as they rolled now towards the cruiser, now away from it. A short distance away from the *Antares* a third trawler was standing by ready to take the place of one of the others as soon as she had taken off all the men that she could accommodate. Huge fenders hung from the side of the big ship, and they stood in very good stead, for the swell, slight as it was, caused the smaller vessels to bump and grind every now and then with considerable force. Indeed, the smallest roll on the part of a ship, although barely noticeable at a moderate distance away becomes a very formidable embarrassment when that vessel comes in close proximity to another one.

A large number of men were already on the decks of the two fishing-boats, while others were in the act of transferring themselves under the supervision of the officers. Boat falls, hawsers, and lines of all sorts were made use of, to effect the passage down on to the waiting decks below. Men were swarming like flies up the davits and from there down the boat falls. Their passage was not effected with complete smoothness in all cases. Nearly always they had to hang on to the fall for a time until the send of a wave brought the trawler with a thud against the side of

the cruiser. This, of course, was the moment to get down on to her deck, and quick they had to be about it, for the trawler quickly rolled away again.

In this fashion, when his turn came, Tug made his escape from the sinking cruiser. After a breathless scramble in mid-air, in the course of which he received a few kicks from the man who followed him from above, and a few oaths and imprecations from the man below him (who also naturally came in for much the same treatment as himself), he at last found his feet guided by someone on to the dirty deck of the fishing-boat.

All the ship's company, except those few unfortunates who met their deaths when the explosion occurred, were taken off, and it was a derelict and deserted vessel which, about ten minutes later, took the last plunge beneath the waves. Tug beheld the final act of the tragedy from the distance of about half a mile, and as the dripping stem and bows reared themselves slowly upward to slide eventually into the watery abyss he had the feeling that something that had been alive and intensely personal, an old and intimate friend, had gone to its death.

The trawlers with their packed cargoes of rescued humanity made for the Firth of Forth, and after reaching the safe and sheltered waters of the harbour, all the men were transferred to the monitor *Captain Pigot*, which immediately proceeded up to Rosyth.

CHAPTER V

UP THE LINE

IN the long drill-shed at Chatham barracks the survivors of the *Antares* congregated on the following afternoon, many of them dressed in brand-new uniforms, awaiting the distribution of leave chits and railway passes which were to give them free dispatch to their homes and freedom from servitude for ten days. The thoughts of the men were by this time wholly concentrated on their approaching liberty. The comparative quietness that pervaded their gatherings for some time after their rescue had now given place to a confiding loquacity. Their conversation consisted, in most instances, however, of a series of vociferous declarations of what they intended to do as soon as they "got up the line". A few spoke of their wives; a few more talked of sweethearts. A good many of them could only bellow almost incoherent ejaculations relating to the anticipated joys of music-halls, eating-houses, prostitutes, and booze.

"My oath! She's the tidiest bit in Bethnal Green."

"Mann Crossman, and I'm going to swim in it."

"Take my tip an' leave that bitch alone. You'll get it as sure as 'ell."

"Did j'ever try their filleted fish an' taters? It's great."

Among the crowd Tug spotted his sea daddy,

Chris Aitken, and went up to him to exchange a few words before leaving. The old stoker was almost as talkative as the rest, though nothing like so vociferous as most of them.

"My missis won't be expecting me just yet," he said. "Of course, she's 'eard of the *Antares* ketchin' a packet, but I ain't let 'er know I'm ashore. I'll give 'er a nice little surprise, bless 'er 'eart."

"Won't she be a bit anxious, not hearing from you?" asked Tug.

"Maybe she is. If so, it'll do 'er all the good in the world. When I turn up she'll be as nice as pie. For a bit, anyway," he added after a pause.

"Isn't she always as nice as pie?" inquired Tug.

"No; not by a good many fathom, she ain't," replied Aitken. "I've knowed times when it was more dangerous to 'andle 'er than a floating mine. That's when she's canned. She's mostly like that when she's canned. She's more'n three coppers can 'andle when she's like that."

"Oh," was all Tug could say to this revelation of female ferocity.

"She ain't always like that, though," Aitken went on. "When she's off the booze she's the finest wife that a man could 'ave, and no one can say she ain't. *And* she's got the manner with it. An admiral couldn't put 'er off 'er course. She can carry it, I *tell* yer. But when she's blotto it all goes by the board. Then 'er language'd shame a bargee. Last time I was 'ome I found 'er layin' down in the roadway at the corner of our street, an' a couple o' coppers were tryin' to get 'er on 'er feet. Gawd! You

should 'ave 'eard the lingo. An' every now an' then she was 'ollerin' out: 'Where's my old man? Why ain't 'e 'ere to take me part, blast 'im?' I stepped up an' interferred. The police was 'andlin' 'er a bit rough, an' I 'ad to sposhchulate a bit. The cops then tried to run me in. In tacklin' me they'd forgot all about the missis. They soon 'ad a gentle reminder. She got on 'er feet an' copped one of 'em such a swipe across the bows as sent 'im arse over tip. 'You let my old man alone,' says she. That fair started the jamboree. There was police whistles a-blowin'. The crowd got enormous, an' there was some rough stuff flyin' about. We finally picked up soundin's in the police court. I got a month and the missis fourteen days. She's a gal to be proud of."

Tug did not audibly concur in the eulogy which his companion bestowed on his wife. He was wondering what sort of a happy home it was where the wife occasionally got canned, used language that would shame a bargee, and engaged in doughty combat with the custodians of the law to the glory of the household, but not to the entire comfort of the husband. It was a state of affairs, however, that was not entirely unique in sailors' households, nor was it one which the husbands dreamed of relating otherwise than with the utmost pride, if he were to judge by the accounts which reached his ears at times when the men were in the humour to relate their domestic adventures.

The appearance of the master-at-arms with a sheaf of railway passes put an end both to stirring recitals of domestic felicity and to reflections on the

vicissitudes of the married state. Ten days' leave was granted, and the men were free to depart at once.

After landing in Scotland Tug had managed to get off a telegram to his father, notifying him of his safety. "Expect to be home to-morrow," the message had concluded. The words contained in the latter part of the telegram were based on the prophecy of a petty officer who had been once before a survivor from a torpedoed vessel, that leave would be granted as soon as they arrived at the depot. This forecast had proved accurate, and Tug was able to leave the depot early in the afternoon.

Tug arrived at his home early in the evening. His telegram had prepared his father and his sister for his arrival, and accordingly a tea of terrific dimensions was laid out for him.

Mr. Wilson, senior, was a man of middle height, with thin hair on his head and a thin moustache. He wore spectacles which did not appear to suit his eyes, for he peered through them with an intensity that indicated some difficulty of vision. He was about forty-five years of age and looked all of it.

Tug's sister, whose name was Margaret, was sixteen years old, dark, and inclined to stoutness. By her friends and acquaintances she was called "Pudden", a name to which she readily responded.

"You've grown a bit, Ernie," his father said as he shook his hand and peered hard at him. "I'm sure you've grown. I don't think I'd've known you if I'd met you in the street."

"Filled out a bit," his sister added.

"D'ye think so?" said Tug. He did not observe

much alteration about himself physically, and it is probable that, except that his hands were harder and his muscles, perhaps, a little bigger and more flexible, his general dimensions were not substantially different from what they were when he left home. His relatives seemed to notice a big difference, though, as people almost always will when they see an acquaintance in a service uniform. "Yes; you've filled out a lot. The life evidently suits you." Tug got a fair amount of that sort of thing in the course of his ten days' leave.

After tea he sat with his father in the small room behind the shop which served both as a sitting-room and dining-room, and recounted to him all he could call to his mind of his experiences in the *Antares*. When he came to the last dire happening—the torpedoing of the ship and its disappearance below the waves—his father's lined countenance exhibited a troubled mind. He sat for a few moments in sombre reflection.

"This torpedoing from under the water is a nasty business," he said at length with a palpable sigh.

"Yes," agreed Tug in a far easier and lighter manner. Tug was young, and his recent experience was already losing the sharpness of its outline. To him the future held far less matter for worry than it did for his father.

"'Aven't they got nets or something to catch these U-boats with?" Mr. Wilson asked.

"They got torpedo-nets, but they're no good when we're steaming."

"Why not?"

Tug did not know why, and he could think of no special reason.

"No; they can't," he said decisively. "They're all right in harbour, but no good at all when you're at sea."

His father did not pursue the point.

"Well, you got out of it all right, thank God. Where will they send you now? On another ship, I suppose?"

"Yes; you bet. They want stokers at sea."

His father meditated awhile with creased forehead. An involuntary sigh escaped him.

"Well, you're better off than in the trenches, Ernie; better off than in the trenches. I've heard 'orrible things about the trenches. They go down like flies; and many that live through it go blind and daft. There's one thing: it can't go on. You know Skilton, the greengrocer down the road. His boy was back on leave the other week. He said the War can't last more than another three months. The Germans have lost too many men. He said they lost fifty thousand killed in one day the last time they attacked his part of the front. Now, he says, they're taking the professors from the universities."

How Skilton's son came to know all this, Wilson senior did not stop to inquire, but the mental picture that came to him of a squad of aged, bent, and white-bearded professors staggering painfully up to the advanced trenches had the effect of raising his optimism perceptibly. The stock of professors, at any rate, could not be inexhaustible.

"Yes, it can't last much longer," he said brightly. "How long leave have they given you?"

"Ten days."

"I suppose you'll want to get out and about a bit. You ought to give your Aunt Emmie a look up before you go back. She sent you a parcel a week ago, but of course you never got it. Going anywhere particular to-night?"

"I thought of going to the pictures."

"Right, my boy. Get all the enjoyment you can. Aunt Emmie will do any day. I've been thinking, though, that you might like to go with me and your sister to the Islington Empire to-night. It'd be a treat for her as well."

"Right-o, dad; we'll go there, then. Tell Pudden not to spend all the evening doing herself up."

Tug stretched himself luxuriously in the easy chair beside the fire.

"My word, dad," he said. "It's good to be back here again."

His father nodded amiably.

On this first evening of his leave Tug was prepared to revel in his new-found liberty. It was a perfectly glorious sensation, this feeling of being able to do practically what he liked. Nothing came amiss to him; he was prepared to fall in with almost any scheme for occupying his time. If his father or his sister had asked him to scrub the floors he would have agreed at once.

"I think to-morrow evening, Ernie, if you're not doing anything special, we might give Aunt Emmie a look up. She's asked after you a good deal."

To this suggestion Tug also agreed without any demur.

Shortly afterwards Margaret brought into the room a large flame-coloured poster which she at once unfolded and held up. It was an advertisement bill proclaiming the fact to all and sundry that an invitation dance under the auspices of the Dalston Twenty-Five Club would be held at the Tuscany Rooms on the following Thursday at eight o'clock. Admission was by ticket only, which could be obtained from the secretary of the club. The price of the tickets was four shillings for a single ticket, and seven shillings for a ticket admitting a lady and gentleman.

"See that," said Margaret. "It's going in the shop window. I suppose you wouldn't care to go? And take me," she added in a small voice.

"No. I'm afraid I can't. Dancing's not much in my line."

"Oh, you could manage all right."

His sister tried to wheedle him into saying "yes".

"I know one or two that's going," she said. "I could put you on to some nice girls."

But Tug was not to be persuaded in this. As he had said, dancing was not in his line, and he had a dread of being made to look ridiculous.

"Sorry, kid. You'll have to leave me out," he said. His sister had to give him up as a bad job.

At the music-hall Tug paid for seats in the Grand Circle, and there, with his father on one side of him and his sister on the other, he sat at ease, smoked

innumerable cigarettes, and enthusiastically applauded each turn, whether good, bad, or indifferent.

Altogether he enjoyed himself tremendously. When they left the theatre and walked home in the cold night air, he felt that it was good to be alive. He was overflowing with goodwill to all mankind. He would have given generously to the most patently fraudulent beggar in the world had he met him on the road home. He would have lent money to almost anyone who asked him. Had he been a drinker he would have gone into the nearest pub and treated everyone in the bar. Life was immense and exhilarating. He felt what the Americans call "good". Than this glorious sense of freedom life surely had nothing better to offer.

Last thing at night when he had got into the old familiar bed, how unfamiliar were the soft white sheets! Their touch was like that of silk. This experience gave just the final touch to an evening of keen enjoyment. It was literally the end of a perfect day. He experienced what was perhaps the acme of human felicity: ease and comfort, bodily and mental, following immediately upon toils, stress, and anxiety.

CHAPTER VI

TUG GOES VISITING

ONE evening Tug accompanied his father to his aunt's place of residence. Mrs. Caley was Tug's aunt on his mother's side. She rented a couple of rooms on the ground floor of a house in Hanson Street, a thoroughfare in the district between Hoxton and Hackney. A widow, of age about fifty, she supported herself mainly by the money she received for cleaning and working up ladies' lingerie. Her industry and conscientious regard for the requirements of her customers resulted in a fair amount of business, and the knowledge that she could generally get as much work as she wanted made her, to make use of the expression commonly used by the said customers, a bit independent.

Somewhere about eight o'clock in the evening Tug and his father arrived at the house in Hanson Street. They were admitted by Tug's aunt, who manifested no little delight at beholding her nephew. At all times she was garrulous to the limit, and rarely kept to any point under discussion, nor even paid much heed to the answers to her own questions. Her extreme talkativeness was in no way kept in reserve when Tug appeared at her home.

"Well, now," she said when they had entered the sitting-room, "if this isn't just wonderful to see you

back again after all this long time. How long is it? And looking fine, I'm sure. Do they feed you well on a ship? He doesn't look bad, does he, Jim?"

"No. They look after them all right, I think," Tug's father agreed.

"What sort of cooks do they have? Tom Heal says his boy can't stomach the food they give them in Kitchener's Army. He says the cooks don't know anything about how to cook. The stew they get isn't good enough for a dog to lap up."

"We get pretty decent food," said Tug. "But we have to get it ready ourselves. We can have a duff if we make it. The ship's cooks don't do anything but put the stuff in the galley and take it out again when it's done."

"Fancy that now. You're a sailor, and you have to be a kind of cook as well? I suppose they give you plenty of time to get your grub ready?"

"We don't get much time. When we're watch-keeping we have to do it in our spare time somehow. Of course, we don't do it every day; we take it in turns to be mess cook. About once a week your turn comes round."

"I suppose it's all right, but it doesn't sound sense to me to make everybody in the ship a cook in turn. How are you keeping, Jim? You're not looking any too well."

At that moment there was a tap on the room door. Mrs. Caley immediately got up and opened it. A female voice was heard to say: "Someone to see you, Mrs. Caley."

She pulled the door to, and went out in the passage.

They heard a conversation carried on in audible whispers; and then Mrs. Caley's voice was heard speaking in louder tones.

"Come inside, Elsie. I've got two gentlemen here. You don't mind, do you?"

She pushed open the door, and there entered a tall and attractive young woman, with a slightly abashed air. She nodded ever so slightly to Mr. Wilson, and then turned her eyes with a faint expression of surprise on Tug's sailor's uniform.

"My brother-in-law, Mr. Wilson. Miss Tranmer," Mrs. Caley hastily intervened.

"We've met before," said Tug's father, smiling as he got up.

"Yes." Miss Tranmer also smiled, and extended her hand.

"This is my nephew, Ernie, just returned from being torpedoed at *sea*," Mrs. Caley said, with an emphasis on the "sea", presumably wishing thereby to stress the difference from being torpedoed on land.

The young lady accorded Tug the faintest possible bow, and said: "How d'ye do?"

"I can't stay very long, I'm afraid," she said to Tug's aunt.

"All right, my dear. I'll get your—things ready for you in a few minutes. How do you like your new job?"

Mrs. Caley did not wait for a reply, but babbled on:

"This young man's had a terrible time of it at sea. His ship went down last week. How long were you in the water, Ernie?"

Tug cleared his throat.

“Well—er——”

“They don’t have any proper cooks on board. They have to get ready their own meals. Isn’t it a shame? And they have to be watching all the time. No wonder they get torpedoed.”

“Do you like the sea?” Elsie Tranmer was not the first person who had put this perfectly inane question to Tug.

“I don’t mind it. It’s all right when you get used to it.”

“It must be wonderful to be on those great big ships,” his aunt chipped in. “What enormous paddle-boxes they’ve got. Do you have anything to do with them, Ernie?”

“No aunt. They don’t have——”

“Your Aunt Lizzie’s first husband was a sailor. He was captain of the fore-top. Is that higher than the captain of the ship you was on?”

“No; not exactly higher,” said Tug. “What they call the fore-top on a man-o’-war is ——”

“How do you find the War affects you, Elsie? I suppose all the young men have gone from the City offices?”

“There seems to be quite a lot still about,” she replied. “Could I have my——”

“Certainly, my dear. I’ll parcel them up now.”

Mrs. Caley got up, and left the room. While she was gone Tug found himself talking quite brightly about ships and the sea, partly to his father, but more especially to the new visitor. He possessed to a marked degree that rather pleasing modesty and restraint

which so many sailors—indeed, nearly all of them—exhibit when in the presence of a good woman.

When his aunt returned she brought with her a small brown-paper parcel neatly tied with string.

“There you are, my dear.”

Miss Tranmer rose, and took the parcel.

“I say,” said Tug hurriedly, as he also got up. “I’ve got to be going now. Which way are you going?”

“I’m going home,” the girl replied. “It’s only round the corner.”

“I’m going that way,” said Tug in a voice of intense determination, and without knowing in the least which corner was referred to. “I may as well go with you.”

“It’s very kind of you,” she replied, with not over-much warmth. “Good night, Mrs. Caley.”

To Mr. Wilson she also said “Good night”. Then she turned to Tug, who was standing fingering his cap by the door.

“Come along then, if you’re coming. Don’t let us spend all the evening saying good night.”

Hastily Tug made a move to the door, and held it open for her to go out. He accompanied her as far as her home, which was only a little distance away. For some time he had been thinking about the forthcoming dance at the Tuscany Rooms, about which his sister had told him, and wondering whether he might venture to ask this young lady if he could take her there. He made what was for him a bold resolve, and before he left her at the door he had extracted from her a rather hesitating promise to go with him.

Tug, it will be observed, was very young and inexperienced. His knowledge of the opposite sex was practically nothing. Moreover, he was a sailor but recently come ashore, fresh from a world of machinery, of hardness, ugliness, ordered squalor, and as such he was only too sadly at the mercy of the tremendous thrill that a deep-sea sailor receives on first beholding the other sex. There is, indeed, a tale of one who, after spending some seven or eight months in a ship in the Southern Atlantic without once setting foot on dry land, at length landed for a couple of hours at Lagos. There he saw in the distance a white woman, doubtless the wife of some trader or official. Helpless, he was impelled to follow her for a considerable distance, feasting his eyes on the unfamiliar sight, and, when at length she disappeared into some house or bungalow, he felt an actual and definite pain at being compelled to turn away. The primitive emotions of sailormen! They are not daily in contact with the softer and fairer side of humanity. Hence they are led, on first beholding her, to offer her an altogether disproportionate, and in many cases undeserved, regard. . . .

There lies the chief cause why so many sailors, when they first come ashore, will pick up the first—and too often it is the lowest—female who happens to heave in sight. The unspeakable harpies that haunt the seaport towns know their man only too well. Hence the often-told story of the simple and credulous sailor plundered of his hard-earned cash, sometimes on his very first night ashore.

And so Tug Wilson did not see in Elsie Tranmer

just an attractive, though otherwise perfectly commonplace, girl from a lower or lower middle-class family. He saw her through a magic lens from the view-point of his past rough experience. He unconsciously elevated her to godhead. Her mere physical presence seemed to hit him.

Gratified as he was by Elsie's acceptance, a little reflection made him realize that he had taken on rather a big thing. He was no dancer, and, so far as he knew, he was not acquainted with a single soul connected with the Twenty-Five Club. Nor did he know anyone—man or girl—who was going to the dance on the next evening. If the truth must be told, he did not look forward to the entertainment wholly with joyful anticipation.

When Tug arrived home, after a period of aimless wandering about the streets, his father was out, but his sister was sitting up waiting for him. She got him his supper, and then sat down opposite to him.

"Dad's been in, and gone out again," she said. "You didn't stop long at Aunty's."

"No. Not very long."

"Been anywhere particular?"

"No; nowhere particular. Just had a look round on my own for the evening."

"Takes a bit of getting used to, I expect, after a life at sea."

"It's a bit strange," her brother agreed.

Mr. Wilson came in soon afterwards. He nodded pleasantly to Tug.

"Spent a pleasant evening, old boy?"

"Yes; not bad. Just been having a look round."

"Just so. The time's not long. Make the most of it."

"I mean to," replied Tug; and then he went to his room.

CHAPTER VII

A WAR-TIME DANCE

ON the following evening Tug accompanied Elsie to the dance in a state of mingled elation and trepidation. His hair was carefully plastered down and shiny, and his uniform and blue jean collar were carefully smoothed and pressed. He carried a pair of brand-new and glittering dancing-shoes, that gave his toes agony when afterwards he put them on.

They made the journey in a tramcar. It was rather full, and Tug had to strap-hang. After a while he bent down and said to her, more by way of making conversation than anything else:

“ You go out to work every day?”

“ Yes, of course.”

“ Where to?”

Tug did not hear the reply, for at that moment a column of passengers—mostly bulky women—bundled him to the for’ard end of the car, and effectually put an end to his attempts at making conversation.

It was not long, however, before a confused blaze of lights shining through the misty window-panes told Tug that they had arrived at the busy crossing of thoroughfares close to the Tuscany Rooms. There followed some strenuous and effective elbow work on the part of the numerous women passengers, some of

whom wanted to get out, while others engaged in a competitive scramble for vacant seats. After a confused *mêlée*, during which Tug had his cap knocked over his eyes by one vigorous dame, he managed to get to the footboard, hot and flustered, and from there down to the roadway. Elsie, perfectly cool and nonchalant, was waiting for him on the pavement. Either she was more experienced than he was at dodging these onslaughts on the part of her own sex, or else she was an adept at jostling her own way through. Tug could not tell which it was, for he never saw how she managed it.

The dance, from Tug's point of view, turned out a complete fiasco. He was a very poor dancer. He could waltz after a fashion; but of the new modes of the dance, the fox-trots and one-steps, which had recently become the vogue, he knew nothing at all. During the whole evening he had but two dances with Elsie. His attempt at a fox-trot was a dismal failure. He trod on her toes repeatedly, stumbled awkwardly against her, and on one occasion he very nearly brought her down on the floor. The termination of the number brought a notable feeling of relief to both of them. With a waltz that he tried later on he had little better success. The recollection of the last fiasco had shaken his nerve, and he was so flurried and flustered that he could not do himself justice.

Apart from his failure as a dancer, Tug felt himself to be an outsider. Everyone else in the dance-room seemed to be completely at home. There was a total lack of formality about the proceedings—a notable outcome of the War, this—that Tug not only could

not understand, but was somehow unable to participate in. The extraordinary accessibility of the women, who seemed, metaphorically, to throw themselves into the arms of the uniformed warriors present, was a thing that he could not fail to notice, but which, somehow, seemed to be something which could have no relation to himself. Most of the people present were not remarkably different from himself, yet they had developed an ease and freedom of intercourse that seemed to put them into a totally different class. The War had made Tug an alien among his own people.

The refreshment interval found Tug somewhat lacking in the fire and enterprise which the ensuing hectic scramble demanded. The refreshments were served at a bar in a small annexe to the ballroom, and immediately on the conclusion of the last dance before the interval there was a headlong rush on the part of the male section of the visitors to be there first. Tug was not by any means in the van of this storming-party. His total lack of experience led him to waste many valuable seconds in making solicitous inquiries of his partner relative to her wants. Consequently, when he arrived at the refreshment-bar he found in front of him a packed mass of shouting, gesticulating men, all demanding to be served with sandwiches, pastries, lemonade or ices, and forming an impenetrable barrier between himself and the bar. His efforts to get near to make himself heard by the harassed girls behind the counter were totally inadequate. He was far too polite for the occasion, for one thing. Had he been on a man-of-war he would have known how to act; but as it was he was a little obsessed by

what he regarded as the superior respectability of the whole show, and he allowed himself to be overborne by people whom, had he encountered in a rougher sphere, he would probably, through his own experience of that sort of thing, have left well behind.

When, after the lapse of ten minutes or so, he got near enough to attract the attention of one of the girls, he found to his disappointment that there were no more ices left. Elsie particularly wanted an ice, and he felt considerable chagrin at his failure to get her one. He had to be content to get her lemonade.

"You've been an awful long time," she said to him when he returned, bringing a trayful of sandwiches, pastries, and lemonade glasses.

"Sorry, but there was a terrible crush there. I couldn't get you an ice. Will this lemonade do?"

"Yes; anything," she replied a trifle irritably. "What a mountain of stuff you've got there. Who's going to eat all that?"

"Well, I'm going to eat some of it," he said. "Sorry I was so long gone. I didn't know there was going to be such a rush."

"It's all right. I didn't mind waiting," she replied somewhat more graciously.

Shortly afterwards a well-groomed and debonair young man in evening-dress came up to their table, and, with a graceful bow to Elsie, asked permission to have the next dance with her. She acceded at once with a bright smile, and shortly afterwards Tug beheld them, to his secret mortification, gliding easily about the floor, and conversing to each other with all the signs of perfect familiarity and friendship.

Tug spent the remainder of the evening in a state of extreme dejection. He saw the debonair young man dance several times with Elsie, and he watched him as he introduced her to one or two male friends of his—doubtless at their solicitation—with whom she also danced. Elsie had no lack of partners, and she appeared to miss Tug's company not in the slightest. He, poor chap, smoked many cigarettes, and sought the company of a young man dressed in khaki, with whom he had exchanged civilities once before earlier in the evening. But the young man had come there to dance, and, although he was polite enough and ready to talk to Tug, his time was far more taken up with the young women.

It must be assumed that Elsie had rather a good time, and one would have thought that she ought to have been grateful to Tug for bringing her there. But there was not much warmth in her manner towards him when he escorted her home. And Tug himself, it must be confessed, was not in his brightest or most entertaining mood. He felt savage with himself for his own failure to please, and even for proposing this unlucky entertainment. He was a little hurt, too, on account of Elsie's marked coolness towards himself. He felt that she could have made it a bit easier for him had she chosen.

Little was said on the homeward journey until they arrived at the corner of her street, when she suddenly said to him:

"When are you going back to sea again?"

"Saturday morning. I've got to go back to Chatham, and from there they'll send me to another ship."

"Oh. Your last ship was sunk, wasn't it?"

"Yes; torpedoed," said Tug, brightening a little.

"What's that thing on your sleeve? That's a torpedo, isn't it?"

"No. It's a propeller."

"A propeller?"

"The screw. It's what sends the ship through the water."

"Oh. All sailors don't have it, do they?"

"No. Only stokers."

"Stokers? Are you a stoker? Aren't you a sailor?" There was surprise, and a slight tinge of disapprobation in her tone.

"Well; I am and I'm not, if you like. I suppose they're all sailors that work in a ship."

"Aren't stokers them that shovel coals on the fire?" Her tones had become highly disapproving.

"Yes. Stokers look after the furnaces. They also look after the machinery in the engine-room." Tug began to feel that by being a stoker he had somehow sunk considerably in her estimation.

"I thought you were a sailor," she said with some asperity. "I didn't know stokers dressed like that." She appeared to think they ought to wear the working-dress of a coal-heaver.

"Well, how did you think they dressed?" said Tug, a trifle irritated by her persistent air of deprecation.

"Oh, I don't know," she answered shortly.

"Well; I'm a stoker, anyway," said Tug angrily.

"Stokers are as good as anyone else, I should say."

"Well, you needn't get rude about it," she said

with a fine air of injured rectitude. "I can't make out why I've been bothering myself about the matter at all."

"No one wants you to bother about it," said Tug.

It was an unlucky rejoinder, and she showed at once how much it incensed her.

"Good night," she said shortly, and turned away from him and walked towards her door. A few steps away she turned round again and said:

"Thank you for what you've done for me; but you needn't trouble to see me any more."

Then she went straight to her door. She let herself in with a key, and shut the door immediately.

He stood for a minute or two looking at the door. Then he gave a short laugh.

"Well, that's that," he said to himself.

Nevertheless, it was a thoroughly depressed Tug Wilson that slowly turned his steps homeward at a late hour that night.

CHAPTER VIII

DRAFTED FOREIGN

TUG returned to Chatham at the expiration of his leave. The abrupt change from freedom to servitude, from comparative comfort to hard living, came, as it always does, as a dark and painful episode. Indeed, some men who served in the War, both on land and on sea, found that the near approach of the unhappy day affected their spirits on the last few days of their freedom so painfully that they could even express the wish that there were no leave, since the glad but short release from service was more than compensated for by the bitterness of the return. "You have to begin it all over again," Tug overheard one say in a station crowd, "only knowing what you've already been through makes it worse than though you were really starting the business."

Chatham Barracks, in spite of its red brick newness, preserved a subtle flavour of the old-time Navy. The undying influence of a glorious past manifested itself in many of the minutest details of every-day routine. It was outstanding in many of the quaint and obsolete practices that still remained a feature of the ceremonial side of barrack life. Even the official designation of the barracks, H.M.S. *Pembroke*, at once brought to mind the tough old three-decker, which this place had superseded, and whose traditions it sought to carry

on. How steeped in the traditions of old-time ships and sailors were even the barrack petty officers, was illustrated by an incident that happened to Tug on the first afternoon of his arrival there. It was pay day, and a long line of naval ratings were waiting their turn to draw their money. Tug was making for the victualling stores at one end of the drill-shed, and, wishing to avoid going the long way round by the end of the queue, he tried to pass through the line of waiting men. He was at once spotted by an officious jaunty, who grabbed him by the arm, and pushed him back the way he had come.

"No, you don't, my son," he said. "You can't break the line. Break the enemy's line; yes. But round the end you go now."

Break the enemy's line! The ghosts of Rodney and Nelson still stalked abroad in this modern headquarters of a machine-driven Navy.

Quaint, too, for shore habitations, were the long messing and living-rooms, termed "mess decks", with their caulked beams and hammock-hooks and rails. These decks were scrubbed in the same manner and inspected as minutely as those of a man-of-war. Then there was Rounds and Evening Quarters as in a ship. When a man went on leave he went "ashore". If he did not turn up again, he "ran".

Tug's first day was almost wholly spent in obtaining a new rig-out from the paymaster's store to replace that which he had lost in the *Antares*. Taking into account the circumstances in which he had lost his belongings, the paymaster's department issued to him a complete renewal of clothing free of charge.

In the depot he found himself an unimportant unit among a vast throng of naval ratings of all descriptions and characters. There were large numbers of obviously new recruits, to whom, be it said, he was not entirely above exhibiting now and then a little "side", such as surely became one who had been afloat, and who was, moreover, a survivor from a notable naval disaster. There was a fair sprinkling of older hands, men from paid-off ships, invalided men from the Dardanelles, from the north of Scotland, from Africa, Mesopotamia; indeed, from a good many parts of the world, for the War had already assumed its world-wide character. Noticeable, and quite a new feature of the war-time Navy, were the large groups of trawlermen awaiting drafts to mine-sweepers, and to kindred service, men on whom the bluejacket's uniform sat rather awkwardly. Queer-looking fellows many of them looked in man-of-war dress; not a bit like the traditional man-of-war's man. Many of them had big, fair, drooping moustaches like those worn by vikings that one sees in pictures. But in one matter at least they were not at all out of place; they all exhibited the unmistakable stamp of the sea. And one could see that they bore the restraint of discipline rather ill. These martinet rules and spruce customs were surely not for the likes of them. They would make their way across the parade-ground in the way they were used to; not at the double, nor even at a respectable walk, but at a rolling, lurching gait, that savoured of the fish-quays of Grimsby or Aberdeen.

They spat with superhuman resource; they were always spitting. And they spat with a sublime

disregard for the spit-kids that were plentifully disposed for their use.

It almost seemed to Tug that the higher powers at Chatham must surely have given some sort of direction that these huskies were not to be hampered by a too literal and forceful interpretation of the regulations. Or else maybe the naval police and the naval petty officers were none too anxious to try on them the effects of their authority. For among them was some rough and tough material, backed up with a clannishness for which the north-east coast is remarkable. So Tug wondered if there was any truth in the story he heard soon after his arrival there, that a master-at-arms was heaved out of a second-floor window of one of the barrack-blocks by a crowd of these worthies. From what he saw of these fellows he felt that it was rather more than possible.

They gathered plentifully in the wet canteen in the evening, and sometimes they got rather drunk and violent. Tug witnessed a heroic scrap on the first evening of his sojourn. Two of them were trying to get at each other, and violently man-handling a number of their cronies who were making well-meant but most bloodily ineffectual efforts to keep them apart. Indeed, the affair looked to Tug like a universal scrimmage, or, more properly speaking, a couple of revolving general combats. From each storm-centre there arose the most blood-curdling threats to all and sundry, combined with a string of oaths which lost nothing in sanguinary emphasis from the north-country burr in which they were delivered.

A little after eight o'clock in the evening Tug

entered the long mess-room which formed his own quarters. There were only a few men in the room, but, on one side, seated against a mess-table, and leaning over an open ditty-box, was a squat, muscular figure which he recognized at once as that of his erst-while shipmate Chris Aitken.

There was something about the appearance of the stoker which at once fixed Tug's attention. Aitken's usually neat and well-cared-for uniform showed unmistakable signs of careless, not to say rough, usage. Creases showed across the back of the jumper; the blue jean collar, which Aitken was wont to roll and gloss with such loving care, was crumpled and dirty; and his cap, which he was wearing on the back of his head, looked as if it had recently been used as a pillow or a footstool, or both. From a general glance it appeared as if the wearer of the soiled and crumpled garments had been recently sleeping in the roadway.

Aitken was gazing into his open ditty-box and feeling the contents one by one in an aimless sort of way, picking out the items by twos and threes without looking at them, and then dropping them back again one at a time. This action he would vary from time to time by casting down his eyes and resting his head on his elbow-propped hands.

Suddenly he looked round and beckoned to two or three bluejackets who were lolling about not far away from him.

"Here. Come 'ere," he said insistently.

The men drew themselves up with a languid show of interest, and approached him.

Aitken took one of the objects from his ditty-box.

It was an old and battered Roman or Byzantine coin.

"See that?" he said. "That's a real Roman coin, that is. I sharked it from a Jew at Stamboul. Look at it. You can read the words on it." He spelled out the letters: "J V S T I N V S A V G. That was the name of the Roman emperor. The paymaster of the *Gallivanter* said it was; an' what 'e didn't know about money wasn't worth knowin', the bloody old skin-flint. It's worth anything ye like. Oo wants it? There you are." He thrust the coin into the paw of one of the onlookers, who took it gingerly and examined it as if it were a poisonous insect.

"Go on," shouted Aitken. "Take 'old of it. I'm givin' it to yer."

He fished out the next article.

"'Ere's the tooth of man-eatin' shark as we copped off Bermuda. Oo wants it?"

He held it up, and finally threw it across the table to a man on the opposite side.

"Now 'ere's a German soft-nosed bullet as we took out o' the shoulder of a nigger in the 'orspital at Dar-es-Salaam."

So he fished out his collection of curios one by one, and gave them, in this purposeless fashion, to anyone who cared to take them.

When he had finished the distribution of his collection he shut down the box-lid with a bang. He leaned forward and looked at Tug, opened his mouth as if he were going to say something, then gulped and shut it again. Tug waited for some time expecting to hear something, but it was long before Aitken could bring himself to talk again.

Suddenly it came out like a flood of water from a weak and over-tested boiler-drum.

"Found 'er in bed, I did, with a blasted leather-neck; a Royal Army Service Corpse." He stood up and shook his fists. "I found 'er in bed, d'y'ear. I found 'er . . ." Sobs choked his utterance. "Royal Army Service Corpse. A sojer; blast 'im."

He threw himself on the stool, and flopped over the mess-table, his face resting on his clenched knuckles. The bluejackets around surveyed him for a while with a sort of detached curiosity; then they sidled away by twos and threes to attend to their own concerns.

After some time Aitken got up and put away his ditty-box. Then he left the room without a word. Tug did not follow him. Quite early he got down his hammock and turned in. When at length he dozed off he was soon awakened by the muttering of a voice not far from him. It was the voice of Chris Aitken. The old stoker was unlashng his hammock preparatory to turning in. The time was very late, and most of the occupants of the mess-room were fast asleep. Aitken talked thickly; he was obviously a trifle drunk, and he was a long time getting his hammock ready.

"The bastard. The bloody bastard. . . . Oh, why didn't I slit 'is bloody throat? Why didn't I?"

There followed a series of growling maledictions levelled at the man who had done him the injury. But Tug heard no word of reproach directed against the unfaithful wife. Curses galore he heaped on the man; all that Tug heard about the woman was: "She wouldn't be so bad if she'd leave the booze alone."

On the next morning when Tug got up he found that Aitken had already gone out. Nor did he see him later on at breakfast time. He made some inquiries about him. Someone had heard Aitken announce his intention of putting in a request to the drafting engineer commander. Presumably, therefore, he had gone to the drafting office. When Tug returned from work in the dockyard later in the day Aitken's kit-bag had been withdrawn, and his place at the mess-table was taken by another man. He had clearly gone away, but where to Tug was unable to find out.

Tug spent a fortnight in the depot, and then one morning he was drafted to the *Agesilaus*. He had no idea where the ship was stationed, and he was not informed. After being examined by the surgeon, he was sent, one of a party of a dozen men, to Avonmouth. There the party boarded a troopship, which left harbour the same evening. Tug was the only stoker in the party, and only two others besides himself were destined for the *Agesilaus*. The remainder of the men were for distribution among a number of other men-of-war.

After a voyage of nearly three weeks, during which no land was sighted after leaving the shores of Great Britain, and during which the weather gradually became warmer and warmer, until it was too hot to stay below deck in any degree of comfort, the troopship dropped anchor one afternoon in the muddy waters of a river estuary in equatorial Africa. A short distance away from where the ship lay at anchor was a man-of-war, a cruiser; and Tug was told by the

petty officer in charge of the party to get his bag and hammock, and be ready to leave the ship at a moment's notice, for the man-of-war close at hand was the *Agesilaus*, the ship to which he had been drafted.

After a short time a steam-cutter from the man-of-war came alongside, and Tug and the two others destined for the vessel were told to get into it, and they were taken to the cruiser. A master-at-arms met them at the gangway, and, after ticking off their names in a book, he took them on to the quarter-deck. A short interview with the commander followed, and they were then dismissed. Once more Tug found himself one of the ship's company of a British man-of-war.

CHAPTER IX

A FRIENDLY PETTY OFFICER

ON a low-ceilinged mess-deck the stokers were having supper. Although it was long after sundown, a steamy heat pervaded the place. The lighted galley, with its pans of frying bacon, and fish-cakes made from tinned salmon, stood at the after end of the mess-deck, and contributed not a little to the heat which the departure of the sun had in no way tempered. No cool draught came from the open port-holes. It felt hot, and it looked hot; everything and everybody looked hot. The stokers, a large number of them clad only in a rag of singlet and shorts—some of them had even discarded the singlet—all shone with exuding sweat. Sweat *trickled* from them; wet patches showed where elbows had recently rested. They shouted and gesticulated—nearly all of them shouted; an effort that made them sweat all the more. On the exposed chests of a few of them there showed red patches of prickly heat, which they frequently scratched viciously whenever the irritation became more than they could stand.

Tug had been assigned to number ten mess. Of the crowd of stokers jammed together at the long and narrow mess-table, two of them made room for him between them. He climbed over the mess-stool and sat down. The others gave him a momentary glance

of curiosity, and then resumed their eating or their discourse.

“Got yer supper, Towney?” his right-hand neighbour queried. “No? We got plenty o’ bread in the barge there, an’ there’s a bit o’ margo left. There ain’t much in the canteen to-night, but we’ll be O.K. to-morrow when the stuff from the trooper comes aboard. They got nothing but a few tins o’ salmon in the canteen.”

Tug was not particularly hungry; he had had a good meal on the troopship just before leaving. A slice of bread smeared with margarine satisfied him. While he was eating, the man who had already spoken to him continued to chatter in his ear. This person, who went by the name of Tiddley Roe, was fairly tall, with jet-black hair, which he kept well greased and plastered down to his head. He had a large mouth, which he generally kept well employed, and which, from its rather too frequent use, occasionally got him into trouble with the more belligerent of his shipmates.

“Are you ’ostilities only?” he asked.

Tug admitted that he was.

“You ain’t one o’ them blokes from the R.N.V.R., are yer?”

“No,” said Tug.

“We ’ad a few o’ them in the ship ’fore we came up ’ere. We picked ’em up at Durban, when we was down there. Gawd, there was some star turns among ’em. One of ’em told the bloke ’e was a fitter, so ’e give ’im a job fittin’ nobs o’ coal in a bunker.

“Were they no good?” asked Tug.

"Well, I won't go so far as to say that. They did their graft all right. But the airs o' some of 'em. They got 'em on coalin' ship. One of 'em just took a dekkko at the bunker 'ole. Then 'e said to the chief pricker:

"'Oh, chief. 'Ave I got to go down there? You are unkind.'

"After about ten seconds up comes 'is 'ead again.

"'Oh, chief,' 'e says. 'I can't breath. My nose an' throat are completely stopped up. It's all ax-fixticating down there.'

"Old Dusty looks down at 'im an' says:

"'Breathe out o' yer bloody navel,' says 'e; an' down 'e shuts the bunker-lid on top of 'im.

"There was another bloke they put tiffy's mate to Jim Lilley, the boilermaker. But some'ow 'is face didn't fit. Jim sent 'im along to the store fer some tallow to caulk up the cracks in the boiler. When 'e come back Jim was missin'. This bloke looked round fer 'im an' said: 'Whare's the hee har hay? I b'lieve 'e's been pullin' my leg.' They *was* some star turns."

At this moment there came a shouted exclamation from a stoker seated opposite. He had been reading from a publication called "The Lower Deck". Something he read seemed to rouse his ire, for he snorted and looked up.

"Gorblimy! *What* d'ye think o' this?" he shouted. "It says 'ere— Wait a bit; I'll read it. 'Jack Mainstay was not to be turned from 'is purpose by the gibes of 'is mess-mates. Seizin' the basin o' grog 'e went to the ship's side, thrust the basin

through the open port'ole, an' tipped the contents into the sea. Thus did 'e take the first step towards conquerin' the demon of alcohol which threatened 'is future success in the Navy an' the 'appiness of 'is 'ome.' The bloody liars!" he roared passionately. "Tipped 'is basin o' grog through the port'ole. I *don't* think! What are they givin' us?"

Tug was glad to get out of this boiling atmosphere. On the upper-deck he found a large and increasing throng of men who, having finished supper, sought the fresher and milder atmosphere which they were unable to get on the crowded and airless mess-decks. Tug lit a pipe, to which he had now become accustomed, and took a few turns up and down the battery. After a time he went up on to the fo'c'sle. On the clean white deck a number of stokers and seamen were sitting about yarning and smoking. Among a little group of three or four Tug perceived his messmate Tiddley Roe. Lying on the deck, and resting on one elbow, he was lazily chewing a small piece of twine, one end of which was projecting from a corner of his mouth. At the same time he was holding forth in a monotonous tone of voice about some bygone adventure of his in far-away England. Tug unostentatiously joined the group.

"One o' the side-shows was a haunted 'ouse," Roe was saying. "Me an' my towney paid our tanners an' went down the alleyway alongside. The way in took a bit o' findin', an' it was dark as 'ell inside, an' the floor was down below the level o' the way in. We went down a plank all smeared with whitewash, an' lumme, the shocks an' thrills started right away. The

plank side-slipped, an' arse over 'tip' we both went. My towney picked up soundin's in a barrer that turned turtle, 'im underneath, and I 'it the deck such a bleed'n konk. There was the 'ell of a clatter, an' something copped me a clump be'ind the ear; it was a small ladder. Then a bucket o' whitewash got upset, an' we both got a fair section o' that. We extriculated ourselves an' 'opped out of it. We decided we'd 'ad about enough o' the haunted 'ouse."

After a time the talk got round to the state of the War.

"I see they got a Polddu up in the after-flat," one man announced. "The French've advanced four miles an' taken six thousand prisoners."

"What abaht our blokes?" said Albert Binns, the Cockney. "They don't never say nothing abaht our blokes. But you can take it from *me* we got the Jerries properly in the peadoo. My brother's a lance-jack in the East London Ghurkas, an' 'e says they can get 'em on the run any time they like. They can easy get 'em on the run. What they want to do is to *keep* 'em on the run."

"If they can get 'em on the run when they likes, why don't they do it then?" inquired Roe.

"I've told yer. They wants to *keep* 'em on the run; keep 'em on the run till they gets 'em to the other side o' the Rhine. Don't give 'em a chance to dig in again. It's all strategy."

"We don't 'ear much about the Russians."

"There you are again. They keeps it all dark," said the Cockney. "My brother says there's 'undreds o' thahsands of 'em comin' rahnd to their part o' the

front 'fore long. 'E's seen some o' them in fur 'ats there already; 'imself 'e's seen 'em. You can take it from *me* something's goin' to 'appen 'fore long. It ain't likely they're goin' to tell all the world what they're goin' to do before'and. They got to use strategy."

"Well, the sooner they get on with it the better I'll like it," said a colossal stoker, Shiner Wright, who had joined the group. "Then p'raps we can get 'ome. I'm gettin' about fed up with this 'ole."

The Cockney looked up with a curl on his lip.

"The better *you'll* like it. You ain't there to get on with it, though, *are* yer? It's easy to talk abaht gettin' on with it when you ain't there. But what abaht the poor blokes sweatin' on top line in the trenches. They got to stand the rub every time. We're all right, we are, an' well out o' the schemozzle. But the sooner *they* get on with it the better *you'll* like it. Damn you, Jack, I'm all right."

The discussion was interrupted by the quartermaster's pipe:

"Clear lower-deck. Up second cutter!"

The lounging crowd on the fo'c'sle drew themselves up and slowly descended to the battery, where already the boat-falls were laid along the deck in preparation for hoisting the boat to the davits. The falls were manned by a double line of men extending along the whole length of the battery.

"Haul taut singly!" came the order from the officer aft.

The falls were pulled by the men until all the slack was taken in.

“Marry! Hoist away!”

A little group of men standing amidships with fifes and a drum at once struck up the exhilarating tune of Weber's “Hunting Song”, and to this accompaniment the men ran for'ard, hauling the boat-falls. At the sound of the whistle, and a shouted “Vast hauling”, the band ceased playing. The boat was up at the davits.

“All fast in the boat, sir.”

The pipe sounded once more, the falls were dropped with a whack on the deck, and the hands were dismissed.

Tug found a billet for his hammock on the mess-deck, and turned in. Although it was very hot, and he sweated prodigiously, he managed to get some sleep at last.

On the following evening the regulating chief stoker told him that he would have to keep watch on the auxiliary boiler, and that he would start with the middle watch that night.

“'Ave you ever been in charge of a boiler before?” the chief stoker asked him.

“No,” replied Tug. “At least, only three watches.”

“That's all right. You won't find it'll kill yer. Don't forget; the middle watch to-night. That's a good night's rest, with the guts kicked out, that is.” The chief stoker nodded his head waggishly as he departed to his berth.

The petty officer in charge of the watch, Bayliss, was of medium height, strong and sinewy. His face was extraordinarily pale; his hair jet black. His eyes

seemed to look beyond the person he was addressing. He greeted Tug genially.

"This is your first experience of boiler watch-keeping?" he inquired of Tug.

"Yes."

"That's all right. It's easy; quite easy. At least, I'm going to make it easy for you." His mouth expanded into a very wide smile. "Some watch-keeping P.O.'s are swines." He went up to Tug and spoke in his ear, almost in a whisper; an elaborate caution that the time and the place did not appear wholly to warrant.

"Gill's a swine," he whispered. "It's hell to work under 'im." He nodded, and drew away. "But I'm not like that," he added more loudly.

"Well, let's see about getting number two cleaned. We always clean number two in the middle. Break up them lumps of coal. I'll show you how to clean a fire. No trouble with me. If you can't manage anything, always come to me. I'll see you through."

Again he smiled at Tug, who thanked him and set to with a will to break up the coal for the priming. Under the expert guidance of Bayliss, and helped largely by the muscular effort generously contributed by the petty officer, the fire was soon cleaned and burning brightly. Tug wiped the sweat from his face and neck, and, seating himself on an upturned skid, lit a cigarette. The petty officer stood regarding him for a few moments.

"Easy, eh? Nothing in it."

Tug nodded.

"I'll always make it easy for you; always easy as pie." Then he took a step or two nearer.

"Anything that passes between me and you goes no further."

Tug looked at him without comprehension.

"I ain't one to talk," the petty officer added. "And neither are you, eh? Anything that passes between me and you down 'ere goes no further."

For the life of him Tug did not know what to reply. What was the man driving at? A shadow of a suspicion flashed across his mind. Some things he had heard . . .

"I don't know what you mean," he said at last. "D'ye mean that you're not supposed to give me any help? Of course I'll keep my mouth shut. I won't say anything about it if you don't want me to."

"That's all right, Towney; that's all right." Bayliss patted him twice on the shoulder. Then he glanced at the steam-pressure gauge. "Keep 'em bright and level," he said. He left the stokehold and passed down the alley-way to the engine-room.

Tug saw little more of him during the watch. Two or three times he came into the stokehold; glanced at the fires, the steam-pressure gauge, the water-glass. Once he took a rake and levelled one of the fires. But there was little amiss. Tug was doing his work well. In the intervals of firing and getting coal from the bunker he had been thinking. And the net result of his cogitations was this: He would do without Bayliss's help as far as his knowledge of the job and his powers of doing it would permit.

At seven bells the petty officer came into the stoke-

hold, lifted down a small rake from the rack overhead, and proceeded to draw the ashes from the pits. Tug, as soon as he perceived his intention, gently but forcibly took the rake away from him.

"All right; I can do it," he said.

The petty officer made no remark.

When the watch was relieved at four o'clock, Bayliss handed over charge to his successor. Before he left the stokehold he went up to Tug, and said quietly:

"Don't forget what I said. It's easy here with me. Don't forget."

Tug made no reply.

CHAPTER X

A FRACAS

ON Sunday, after church, the captain made a series of announcements to the ship's company. He stated that the ship would remain at her present anchorage for a considerable time; that military operations of some considerable importance were being conducted in the interior; and that the ship's company would be held in readiness to give what support it could. He also told the men that he expected them to pay close regard to the regulations that had been put in force with regard to their health.

"Any man who wilfully disregards the orders will be severely dealt with," he said. "I have several times observed men on the upper-deck during the day-time without their sun-helmets. Let me give you this last warning: Any man appearing on deck between sunrise and sunset without wearing his helmet will be put in the commander's report."

"There's one other matter which concerns a few of you," he added. "There's too much drunkenness on the part of the men who go ashore. Where you get the stuff from, I don't know; but if you had an atom of sense you'd leave it alone. Bad whisky and trade gin will kill you off far quicker than the climate will. Take my tip, and steer clear of it. That's all."

When the hands were dismissed, and the stokers were well away from the quarter-deck, Mallett, a young stoker, after looking back to make sure that he was beyond earshot, observed loudly :

“ Yes. It’s bad whisky when we gets it. Those brass-mounted swines away aft can souse themselves up to the eyes in it, an’ it don’t do them no ’arm.”

As the captain had said, a few of the men did contrive to get drunk ashore on trade gin. The stuff did not appear to be easy to get, however, and the happy persons who reached the ship in that desirable state were the objects of not a little envy on the part of their less fortunate shipmates. The supply of spirits was evidently limited. Where the stuff was to be obtained was a closely and jealously guarded secret. The occasions when it was to be obtained were comparatively rare. One afternoon it would be observed that the little crowd of liberty men, which ordinarily numbered about ten or a dozen, had on this particular occasion swelled to double that number. It would also be noticed that some of these men held mysterious consultations together while waiting to go ashore. These circumstances were not overlooked by the observant jaunty, and after the crowd had departed he would tell his henchman, the crusher, to be prepared for all eventualities later on in the evening.

The amount of liquor consumed must have been considerable in some cases, for men were sometimes brought back to the ship in a state of utter insensibility. Now and then one would come on board in a belligerent state bordering on madness. An attempt to fight the quartermaster, the jaunty, the marine

corporal, anybody, in fact, who loomed up on his immediate horizon, always finished up by his being placed in irons in the sentry's charge.

A prominent member of this brotherhood of the bottle was the big stoker, Shiner Wright, who was not a very well-liked person, even when he was sober. His temper was easily aroused, and a blow from him, forthcoming on the smallest provocation, was, on account of his size and strength, quite sufficient for most men to go on with. He was a surly and truculent brute at the best of times. When under the influence of alcohol the inherent ill-nature of his disposition came surely to the surface. His mess-mates knew him too well, and whenever he came from the shore at any place where there was booze to be got, they generally stood clear of him, and left their room all to his unpalatable self.

One evening Shiner came back to the ship more than ordinarily soused. He could, in fact, only stand with the greatest difficulty; and how he managed to stagger off the quarter-deck without getting himself placed under arrest is a matter of some mystery. But stagger off it he did, and even got as far for'ard as the stokers' hatchway without coming to grief. But there a mishap befell him. He had been steering a comparatively straight course for a distance of about a dozen yards or so when, for no particular reason, he suddenly lurched towards the ship's side. Standing just there close to the bulwark, with his back to Wright, was Tug's mess-mate, Tiddley Roe. He was addressing a couple of seamen, and explaining his views on running a canteen when he felt a most

violent shove in the back which propelled him with some force against the hammock nettings. Recovering himself, he turned round with justifiable astonishment, and beheld Shiner Wright performing what appeared to be a cross between a Maori dance and a game of blind man's buff. Actually, Shiner was only trying to preserve his equilibrium, which had been somewhat disturbed by the collision. Then Roe good-naturedly, though perhaps ill-advisedly, stepped forward to assist the staggering mucko. Shiner perceived the move, but, as men in his condition frequently will do, he mistook his import. The previous collision his muddled intellect attributed to the clumsiness, if not the positive malevolence, of Roe. Therefore, when the latter advanced rapidly towards him, what other object could the man have than another malicious attack on him?

Before Roe could touch him, Wright jabbed his right fist forward at his face. It missed its mark by several inches. Shiner lost his balance, and doubtless would have fallen, but his hand touched the neck of his opponent's shirt. His fingers closed on the flannel, and then, having saved himself from falling, he proceeded to mete out punishment to his would-be helper. A blow aimed at his face with his left hand missed again, so he got his right hand free, and fetched Roe a clump on the side of the face.

"'Old that one," he said thickly.

But Roe was not taking any more of this sort of treatment, especially from a man who was obviously hard put to it to escape hurting himself. He stepped on one side and then hit Wright fairly hard on the

jaw. . . . Shiner wobbled a bit, gave his opponent a fishy-eyed stare of astonishment, and then tumbled down with a crash on the deck. He made no attempt to rise. It was an absurdly easy victory for Roe, but, considering the state of his opponent, it is difficult to see what other result could have come to pass.

Shiner was gathered up by a squad of his mess-mates and lugged away to his hammock, into which, piece by piece, with a vast amount of hauling and heaving, they eventually got him stowed away.

Roe would have done well, perhaps, to have left the matter where it stood. But in answer to one or two curious inquiries from his acquaintances who, not being witnesses of the affair, wanted to know what had happened, he showed a disposition to enlarge upon it. Nor did his account of the occurrence lose anything after the second or third telling. Before the evening was out a very large number of his shipmates were made aware of how he had engaged in a stand-up fight (that description of it was surely a lie) with the husky Shiner Wright, and of how he had vanquished the latter after only a couple of rounds.

"He led at me with 'is right," said Tiddley. "I side-stepped, an' got 'im on the point. That finished 'im."

The ship's company began to think that, in Roe, they had been entertaining a dark horse unawares.

But for Tiddley Roe there came next morning a dismal anti-climax. Tug Wilson had kept the middle watch that morning, and he turned into his hammock at about ten minutes past four. At five-thirty he was dimly conscious of the bugle-call and the stentorian

summons of the quartermaster: "All hands, 'eave out, 'eave out, 'eave out, lash up an' stow." Being a watchkeeper, this summons had no other significance for him than to remind him that his short period of repose was nearly over. He had another three-quarters of an hour before the second pipe and the order "Down guard and steerage hammocks" would bring to an end his sleep and that of all the other watchkeeping hands in the ship.

He had snuggled himself down to enjoy the luxury of this little extra bit, when another disturbance arose to bring him to consciousness. A few yards away from him was the hammock of Tiddley Roe, and it was Roe's hammock which became the centre of what sounded to him something like a sanguinary riot.

The cause of the disturbance was Shiner Wright. When the big stoker came to his senses, the first thing he discovered was that he was wearing his trousers and boots. Such a circumstance could indicate but one thing: he had been drunk the night before. Turning over in his mind what he could remember of his actions on the previous evening, one feature came rather prominently before him—the face of Tiddley Roe. And the more he reflected, the clearer it became that Roe had hit him the night before. He could not remember much that had happened. He did not know how the trouble had arisen, or how it had ended; but one thing was perfectly clear to his recollection: Roe had hit him on the jaw. And he could not remember returning the blow. To take a blow from anyone without repaying the attention at least threefold was no part of Shiner's creed, and

the thought of such a happening at once aroused the belligerent tendencies of his nature. Without more ado he sprang out of his hammock and darted across to where Roe was just beginning to lash up. He gripped his man by the shoulder and swung him round to face him.

"'Ere, I want you," he said. Roe looked at his face, and he at once turned pale.

Shiner took a step backward; and then he launched his fist at the other man's face. Roe went down like a skittle. He staggered on to his feet, and it was observed that blood was trickling down his face. Before he could straighten himself up, Shiner hit him again, and down he went a second time. Shiner waited for him to get up again, but Roe was either incapable of getting up, or else he thought he had better not. Seeing that his man was not inclined to take any more, Shiner bent down, grasped him by the shoulder, and tried to pull him on to his feet. The task was a little beyond him, for Roe was a fairly big fellow, but he managed to get him into a half-sitting, half-reclining posture. Then he proceeded to pound his face with his fist. But then he received a decisive interruption.

"'Ere, pack that up, Shiner," a big stoker shouted behind him. Shiner felt his arm grasped and forcibly held.

"You mind yer own bloody business," he shouted back. "Blast yer innards. Let go."

"No, you don't, Towney. Hold his bloody mitt, someone," the stoker roared.

Two or three stokers threw themselves on the

struggling ruffian and succeeded in holding him, while a couple more grabbed hold of Roe and pulled him away. At that moment the appearance of the chief stoker produced an interruption that practically terminated the fracas. Much noisy profanity continued to pass to and fro, but Shiner's bellicosity cooled down to sanguinary threats directed towards the persons who had put a stop to his brutality.

By the time the affair was concluded, Tug, whose sleep had been effectually disturbed, decided that he might as well turn out. There was not very much time left, anyway, and the early morning cocoa had a way of disappearing before the later rising watch-keepers could get a look in. So he got out, dressed himself, and lashed up his hammock. He managed to get a few dregs of cocoa that had been left at the bottom of the can. As he stood drinking, he noticed his mess-mate, Tiddley Roe, sitting at the end of the mess-table against the ship's side. He was resting his head on one hand, and wore a most woebegone look. Tug could not help contrasting the down-trodden appearance of the unfortunate Tiddley with his rather flamboyant air of the night before. But he was sorry for him none the less, and his sympathy took the practical turn of frying his mess-mate's rasher of bacon along with his own. For Wright he had the utmost detestation and fear. He resolved to steer clear of the ruffian as much as he could.

Tug's next watch in the stokehold was the combined period of the two dog watches which, for the purpose of auxiliary watch-keeping, had been formed into one four-hour watch. Stoker Petty Officer

Bayliss began once more to display his excessive friendliness for Tug. The dog watches were always easy ones in the stokehold while the ship was at anchor. There were no fires to clean, no tubes to sweep. Generally the distilling machinery was not working, and consequently the consumption of fuel was small. This watch was not an exception in that respect. Tug had little to do between the occasional short spells of firing-up.

The petty officer spent a good deal of his time in the stokehold, and endeavoured frequently to engage his boiler-room watchkeeper in conversation, attempts which did not meet with much success in the long run. He offered Tug a cigarette, which was declined with thanks; Tug produced and lit his pipe. Whatever was Bayliss's object in bestowing his regard on him, Tug wanted none of it. He had resolved to accept no favours from Bayliss.

"We got the middle box o' tubes to sweep in the morning watch, Towney," the petty officer observed.

"Yes, I know that," said Tug.

"I'll give yer a hand with it."

"Yes?" said Tug. "I don't think you need to. I can manage all right."

Shortly afterwards Tug began to draw the ashes from the pits. It was getting near the end of the watch; the daywork hands had long departed. As he stooped he felt a pinch at the bottom of his back. He turned round sharply. Bayliss was confronting him with a peculiar and sinister grin on his face. Tug straightened himself and dropped the rake.

"Take your bloody hands off me," he said angrily.

"What's up, Towney?" the petty officer said in a soft, wheedling tone.

"Never mind about what's up. You keep your mitts to yerself. I'm telling yer."

"Don't get dizzy," said Bayliss in harder tones. "You needn't get uppish." He walked away a few steps and stopped. Then he turned round and came up to Tug again. He was now very angry indeed.

"You've 'ad a bloody easy time of it with me, an' don't you forget it," he shouted. "I can make it bloody 'ard for you down 'ere, and don't forget that."

"We'll see how you like it," he added after a pause.

Tug pondered for a moment in silence. Then he set his teeth.

"All right," he said in a quiet but determined tone. "We'll see how I like it. And we'll see how *you* like explaining it all to the bloke. I'm putting in a request as soon as I'm off watch. We'll see how you like what I'm goin' to tell 'im."

"What are you putting in a request about?" Bayliss asked in an altered voice.

"That's my business," replied Tug decisively.

"You got nothing against me," said Bayliss. There was a distinct trace of anxiety in his voice now.

"No?" said Tug shortly. "All right, then." He stooped down and took hold of the rake once more.

"We'll see," he added portentously.

He finished the ash-pits and said not another word. Bayliss mumbled something to himself, and after a minute or two took himself off.

But when the watch was relieved and Tug was about to ascend the ladder, Bayliss came up to him once more.

"I say, Towney," he whispered, "you don't want to put in that there request. You an' me can get on all right. We don't want to make no trouble, do we, eh? We'll say no more about it, eh?"

"All right, then," Tug agreed after some show of hesitation. "You let me alone, and keep yer hands off me, that's all." And he went up the ladder.

CHAPTER XI

BUSHED

NEXT day, after he had finished the morning watch, Tug had a period of stand-off until eight o'clock on the following morning. In the afternoon he decided he would go ashore by the liberty boat and see the African Continent, or as much of it as some two and a half hours of liberty would permit.

Twice he had been ashore already, but each time he had been in the company of one or more of his shipmates, none of whom were disposed for much walking. This time he determined to go for a walk by himself and explore the neighbourhood a little. Accordingly he dressed himself in spotlessly clean white duck pants and flannel shirt, donned the broad-brimmed pith helmet which a considerate Admiralty had provided for him as a protection against the fierce rays of the sun, and fell in with the small batch of liberty men on the upper deck at seven bells.

Having satisfactorily passed the scrutiny of the officer of the day, the men got over the side and were taken ashore in a large motor-launch. Tug was determined on this occasion to see as much of the neighbourhood as he could in the short time allowed him. Therefore he left the rest of the crowd to their rather aimless devices and set off at as brisk a pace as the scorching atmosphere permitted along one of

the numerous tracks that led from the vicinity of the landing-stage. In a few minutes he had left behind him the bungalows and store-sheds near the river bank. He passed a few negro huts and wandered on through banana and pineapple plantations, a native village or two, and then the ragged edge of the bush began to appear. After a time the track dwindled to a narrow path between two high walls of green. As he went farther and farther the jungle on either side of him grew thicker and thicker, more and more impenetrable. Soon the tangle of branches and stems met over his head, shutting out the sunlight and forming a narrow tunnel through which it was impossible to see ahead for a distance of more than a dozen yards. As this welter of riotous vegetation closed in on him the feeling of safety and of nearness to his fellow-creatures gave place to a rather oppressive sense of solitude. The intense sunlight was felt no longer, but the heat was none the less oppressive. But it was a steamy wash-house kind of heat now, not the skin-blistering kind of the open river bank. No shaft of sun-ray penetrated this horrible tangle of greenery. Such light as there was came as a dim reflected glimmer. It was a poor, wan imitation of sunlight. The way got harder; projecting stems retarded his progress, and sometimes showed a disposition to hold him back.

At a much diminished speed Tug industriously forced his way ahead and arrived at length at a point where, just ahead of him, the dim twilight changed to a forbidding blackness. Here it occurred to him that he had gone about far enough. This tropical

jungle was interesting enough in its way, but one could have more than enough of a good thing. And that uninviting blackness ahead might harbour creatures of an unhealthy kind. The strange buzzings, twitterings, and rustlings of this outlandish place seemed to have increased to an enormous extent in the last few minutes. They were, in fact, not to put too fine a point on it, beginning to get on Tug's nerves. And the projecting stems of creeping plants that touched him showed, some of them, an unpleasant tendency to cling. He began to think of snakes. If there was a snake anywhere near him in this dark jungle and it meant him any harm, he thought the chances were all in favour of the snake.

That settled it. He'd seen enough of the bush. And there wasn't very much to see, anyway. He turned and retraced his steps at a rather quicker rate. To his relief the sombre dimness of the jungle began to lighten; the atmosphere became somewhat less oppressive; he breathed more easily. As he left the thickest part of the tangled wilderness behind him he slowed down his pace somewhat. There was really no hurry, he thought; he had more than an hour left in which to reach the landing-stage. Moreover, he was in a bath of perspiration. There was not a breath of wind to cool him. So he sauntered along at the slowest possible speed.

But had he so much time to spare? It was surely getting darker; or was this infernal bush closing in on him again? He looked upward. The boughs and stems and creepers were entwined over his head. That was not as it ought to be just here, surely. This

part of his route was open to the sky overhead when he passed along that way before. Was it, though? He couldn't be quite sure. It had certainly been lighter, but then, the day was not so far advanced. Perhaps it was the night coming on. Unconsciously he quickened his pace. And then his heart began to sink. That abominable black, tunnel-like effect was beginning to appear again. He stopped and went back a little way. It got somewhat lighter overhead; the day was not yet over. Then it dawned on him that, somehow, he had contrived to miss his way. He must have got off the right path somewhere. On his outward journey he had noticed more than one small path branching away either to the right or to the left, and he remembered wondering whether they were real paths made by niggers or just natural breaks in the vegetable growth. He had evidently got on to one of them now.

The thing to do now, obviously, was to avoid panic and go back and look carefully for the point of intersection. He went along warily, and before very long came to a place where, at a bend in the path, another path clearly branched off to the right. He decided this must be the right way back, and he made his way along it with a lighter heart. The path seemed to him to be rather narrower than that by which he had come, but perhaps that was only his fancy. And there were some other features about it that seemed different, but doubtless that was due to the failing light. It seemed also of inordinate length. He walked, or rather crept, along it for a considerable time, when the darkness began to descend quickly

upon him. And it was the darkness of the night this time, there was no mistaking it. Still there was no sign of the bush leaving him.

All at once the path dropped quite abruptly. Once more he stayed his course in dismay. He had not passed by that fall in the ground before; he was quite certain of that. He was on the wrong track, after all. Well, there was no use in going back now. It was growing too dark to look for fresh paths. The sky was still visible above his head; there was some little comfort in that. On the whole he thought it best to push on the way he was going. This path must surely lead somewhere. It was now quite dark, and he had the greatest difficulty in perceiving the path. After a while he became aware that the character of the surrounding vegetation had altered. He was no longer retarded by projecting branches and clinging stems; his way was easier. The tangled bush vegetation had given place to a thick growth of tall bamboo-like plants. The ground under his feet became softer. A few steps farther on his feet sank deeply into slimy mud. He had landed in a swamp. This was getting beyond the limit, he thought. Quickly he struggled backward out of the mire and got on to the firmer ground he had just left.

What had he better do now? Nothing, apparently, but sit down and wait for daylight; not a very pleasing prospect, seeing that the sun had only just gone down. Nor did he much fancy the idea of spending the night in that unwholesome place. Quite apart from fevers which he stood a good chance of catching here, he had always before his mind's eye

those fearsome creatures that his information or his imagination led him to expect to find in the tropical jungle, above all the loathsome fauna of the creepy kind.

As he stood there a prey to these rather depressing reflections a new terror burst upon him. It was a low, muffled sound, booming, droning; a succession of quickly reiterated thumps, now quiet almost to extinction, then rising in a crescendo to high pitch, then slowly dying away again, but all the time maintaining an unaltered rhythm. It came from somewhere on his left hand as he faced the swampy region from which he had just extricated himself. Then, as he listened in fearful astonishment, another sound was added to the drumming: a tuneless sort of chant. All at once his fear left him like magic. Human voices! Nigger voices, it is true; savage voices; but human voices none the more for that. He was no longer without human companionship in this dreadful place.

Resolutely, and without weighing the possibilities of disaster, he began to force his way through the canes in the direction from which he thought the sound proceeded. The noise died down considerably, and he began to fear that he was getting away from it. Still he laboriously forged ahead in what he thought to be a fairly straight line, now hopefully, now in a panic of fear. The sweat poured from him. Breathlessly he stopped now and then to listen. The drumming and the chanting still faintly caught his ear. On again, panting and sweating, he launched himself as quickly as he could, forcing apart the stems

where he could, or squeezing himself between the more stubborn, dreading all the time that the guiding sounds would cease.

How long he thus laboured, in what erratic curves and circles he progressed, he could form no idea, but after some time he felt a squelching under his feet. He was on swampy ground again. Fatigue and disappointment now disheartened him almost to the point of giving up the struggle, when, away to the right, he saw through the canes that most heartening of all sights to one in his situation, the reflected glow of a fire. With renewed energy he floundered onward in the direction of the welcoming glow. The ground hardened; the cane brake came to an end; an area of straggling bushes replaced it. The glow became brighter and brighter, and the noise of drumming and chanting grew louder. Very soon he saw, just ahead of him, a fire and a number of lights. Panting, he emerged from the bushes and threw himself down on the hard ground. He was safe, and in the company of his fellow-men.

For quite a long time Tug lay there without taking any further interest in his surroundings. Now that he had extricated himself from that dreadful bush he was not greatly concerned about what he might do next. He was content to lie there in comparative ease and recover his strength at leisure. It was some time before he became properly conscious of his own condition. It was only when he idly sought to get rid of some mud that clung to his fingers by rubbing his hand on the opposite sleeve of his shirt that he discovered there was no sleeve there. Not only that,

but when he felt about himself he found there was not much shirt, either. A few rags hung together from his neck downwards. His trousers being of tougher material were in somewhat better case, but a few substantial rents showed that the bush had taken toll in that direction also. And now that he was rested and more in a condition to survey himself he found that his own person had not escaped entirely without injury. His arms, neck, and face all smarted from the effects of the scratches he had received, and a few small dark patches on his skin that he had at first taken to be dried mud proved on closer examination to be his own blood.

But this was all a trifling matter when set in the balance with his escape. He got up and had a look round him. The monotonous drumming had not ceased all this time; the chanting was more intermittent. By the light of a large fire and a number of torches—the latter held up by some of the onlookers—about fifty or sixty niggers, clothed for the most part in a sort of skirt of a dark cotton fabric, were performing a dance—at least he supposed that was what it must be, though it resembled no dance that he had ever either seen or imagined. Arranged in a complete circle, one behind another, these people were making a comical sort of shuffle to the accompaniment of a couple of gourd drums rapidly thumped in a regular but monotonous rhythm by two squatting performers. In this manner the dancers slowly progressed round the circle. For the most part they chanted a monotonous sing-song; just a bar or two repeated incessantly without variation. Now and

again the dancers would stop all at once, jerk their bodies upright, and swing themselves round in the opposite direction, this manœuvre always being accompanied by a loud bellow from everybody, dancers and spectators. This was the only variation to what appeared to Tug a monotonous and unimpressive spectacle.

For some minutes Tug stood still, undecided what to do next. The tremendous relief that he experienced through being once more among his fellow human beings, albeit they were black ones, did not blind him to the fact that he had still to find some means of getting back to the ship. He had missed the liberty boat by a couple of hours at least, and so far he did not even know in which direction the jetty lay. He might seek the help of these niggers, and on the whole that seemed the best thing to do. He did not feel inclined to do any more exploring on his own account in the dark.

He took a few steps in the direction of the crowd. And then he was startled by hearing an unmistakable rustling in the undergrowth quite close to him. What the devil could that be now? This evening was getting rather full of happenings, and Tug was almost prepared for anything. The rustling died down for a moment, became louder, and then was added to it something very like a suppressed feminine shriek. The rustling noise got very much louder. There was obviously a scrimmage of some sort going on in that undergrowth. Another scream went up, followed by a gurgle, and then an unmistakably civilized voice said;

"You little bitch. You've bitten 'alf through my 'and."

The struggle was renewed, and so were the voices. The woman tried to scream. The man tried to prevent her.

"Lie down, blast yer." Tug thought he recognized the voice of his shipmate, Shiner Wright.

Tug entered the bushes and made his way a few paces to where two figures were struggling on the ground. By the reflection of the distant fire he could see that one of them was clothed in white, and, as he had thought, it was the big stoker Wright. The other, clothed scarcely at all, was a negro girl. She was putting forth the most frantic struggles to free herself from the grasp of the white man, kicking, biting, scratching, and beating him with her fists. A moment after Tug appeared Wright lost his patience, his temper, or both, and, raising his right fist, he fetched her a heavy blow on the forehead.

"'Old that one, damn yer! Now will ye be still?"

It may have been little concern of Tug's, and it may have been unwise of him to interfere in the affairs of his redoubtable and truculent shipmate, especially on behalf of a member of the despised black race, but the sound of the blow impelled him to cast prudence to the darkness of the night and take an active part in the disturbance. Without any preconceived or precise notion of what he meant to do, he launched himself at the white outline of the big stoker. In some manner that he could never clearly recollect afterwards his right arm got round Shiner's neck, and, the back of his opponent being towards

him, he found himself slowly and most effectively garroting him. For a moment or two Wright kept an obstinate grip on the girl, and then, feeling his life being choked out of him, he was forced to let go his hold.

Then began a violent struggle between the two white men. The girl, finding herself suddenly freed, bounded to her feet and darted away, leaving Tug, the object of his interference attained, struggling now on his own behalf. Tug now found himself on the horns of a very awkward dilemma. His opponent was very much stronger than he was, and although the reek of spirits proclaimed the fact that he had been drinking heavily, he was obviously not so drunk as to be incapable of knowing what he was doing. A stand-up fight between them, therefore, could not but end disastrously for Tug. But as a set-off against this Tug had his man at such a tremendous disadvantage that he was practically incapable of doing anything at all. In fact, unless Tug relaxed his hold pretty soon there was every likelihood of Shiner being a dead man. The unpleasant alternatives that presented themselves to Tug were either to choke the life out of his opponent, which he seemed to be doing pretty effectively now, or else to let go his hold with the practical certainty of getting the hammering of his life. He did not like the idea of either alternative. But while he was trying to think it all out, at the same time holding on to his opponent for dear life, the matter was settled for him by Shiner just collapsing all of a heap. Shiner was in truth *hors de combat*. For some time his struggles had been

growing weaker as his breath left his body, until at last he felt his life leaving him, and he lost consciousness.

Tug knelt down and shook him, but he lay like a log. For a minute or two Tug had a vague notion of trying artificial respiration, but as he did not know how to begin he was forced to abandon the idea. Then panic overtook him. What if he had killed the man? Supposing he was had up for murder. He took a last look at the sprawling figure and then crept away. He avoided the dancing niggers, still engaged in their monotonous tum-tumming, and sped round the edge of the circle of light. On the opposite side he found himself on a wide track. It was evidently a road of some sort. He walked some distance along it and had got almost out of range of the firelight when he all but cannoned into a nigger moving in the opposite direction. The nigger was clothed in white drill and carried a walking-stick. He stepped on one side to let Tug pass. Tug was passing on when, perceiving the nature of his dress, it occurred to him that the fellow might speak English. Accordingly he stopped him.

"I want the ship," he said. "The jetty. Landing-stage. You know him?"

"You want de man-o'-war?"

"Yes," said Tug.

"I show you." He turned round and led Tug in the direction from which he had just come. He said no more and neither did Tug. The way was not very far, and before long he saw some lights showing through the dark stems of the trees and their reflection

on the water. A short distance ahead a couple of lighted lanterns indicated the foot of the jetty. As they drew nearer they could hear voices, and the tones were unmistakably British.

"All right?" the nigger said to him.

"Yes. Thanks," Tug replied. The nigger turned back, and Tug hastened to the jetty. He found the steam cutter tied up there, and it was the voices of the coxswain and the stoker engaged in an argument that he had heard. As soon as they saw him they stopped their talk and gazed at him in astonishment.

"Blimey!" said the coxswain.

"Where to 'ell 'ave you come from?" the stoker asked.

"I got lost in the bush," replied Tug.

"Lost in the bush! I should just about say you 'ave, judgin' by the look of yer."

"What was ye doin' in the bush?" the coxswain asked. "Take a black mammy there?"

"No, I didn't," replied Tug. The question at once reminded him of Shiner Wright, and he wondered if he ought to tell these men about the stoker whom he had left for dead about a quarter of an hour ago. While he was turning the matter over in his mind he heard footsteps approaching the jetty, and a white man appeared. The new-comer was an officer's steward named Fenley, a person whom Tug knew by sight. The steward was carrying a couple of parcels, and it was for him and his parcels that the steam cutter was waiting at the jetty.

They all got on board and the boat shoved off. In a few minutes they were alongside the ship. During

the passage the steward displayed a notable solicitude for Tug's welfare.

"You want to get to the sick bay at once," he said. "It'll be a wonder if you don't 'ave fever after this."

The first person that Tug encountered when he stepped on board was the ship's corporal, a broad-shouldered, red-faced person with a tendency to fatness.

"Gawd almighty! What've we got here?" he said as he scanned Tug's appearance by the light of one of the electric lamps. "Are you one of the ship's company, or 'ave you come for the messmen's gash?"

"I got lost in the bush." Tug repeated his previous explanation.

"Lookin' for crocodiles' eggs, eh? You're just about three hours adrift. Well, you'd better cut along to the sick bay an' get some iodine for them scratches. I've known 'em to turn out real bad out 'ere. I'll make it all right with the jonty."

Tug thanked him and hastened below. He was not much hurt, but he wisely followed the advice of the crusher. After a wash and a change he saw one of the sick-berth stewards, a melancholy and rather cross individual, who, after a lot of grumbling, painted his wounds with iodine. After that he felt more comfortable. He got his supper and turned in as early as he could; but as he lay in his hammock he could not for a very long time forget about the sprawling figure in white duck that he had left in the undergrowth ashore.

CHAPTER XII

A STEWARD'S REMINISCENCES

THE next morning Tug felt none the worse physically for his experience of the previous evening, and he was able to do his work in the forenoon watch without any difficulty. He came up from down below at noon, and, after bathing, went to his mess for dinner. He had taken two or three mouthfuls of the bully beef pie prepared by the mess-cooks when suddenly his jaws ceased to work. He laid down his knife and fork and gazed hard at a figure descending the ladder from the upper deck. That bulky figure was too substantial to be a ghost, and, moreover, ghosts did not climb down deck ladders of men-of-war in broad daylight in tropical Africa, whatever may be their nocturnal practices off the Cape of Good Hope. But it was some two or three minutes before Tug realized that the white-dressed figure that lurched along the mess-deck was that of his opponent of the bush, the stoker Wright. When he did realize it, it was as much as he could do to prevent himself from running up and embracing him. Wisely he did nothing of the sort, and Shiner, if he observed him, did not recognize him as the man who had throttled the life almost out of him the night before.

After dinner Tug went on the upper deck for a

smoke. He had not been there very long when he observed Shiner Wright a little way away from him talking to two or three other stokers. Something impelled Tug to move in their direction. Without doubt the big stoker would be talking about his adventures, and Tug could not refrain from getting near him in order to hear what he had to say. As he came slowly up Wright's eye fell on him, but the momentary glance that he gave to Tug conveyed no sign of recognition. Clearly Tug's existence had no significance for Shiner Wright.

"I 'ad to let go," Tug heard him say, "and the bitch got away. I'd a managed 'er all right, though she did fight like 'ell. But I'd like to get 'old o' the black swine that got me round the neck. I never saw 'im in the dark. 'E got be'ind me and took me unawares, blast 'im."

Tug moved away again. So that was that. Altogether the affair had turned out quite satisfactory. But immediately afterwards the steward Fenley came up and loudly challenged him about his last night's adventure.

"All right now?" he inquired. "I guess you won't want to go mammy hunting in the bush again in a hurry."

Fenley was a person who spoke in a rather penetrating tone of voice. Taking into account the place and the circumstances the steward now spoke far too loud for Tug's liking. It was rather hurriedly, therefore, that he moved away from the conversing group he had just left, while at the same time he assured the steward that he was quite recovered.

Fenley walked beside him talking all the while. He told him that he had had a marvellous escape from being food for vultures.

In the period following his shore adventure Tug saw a good deal of Fenley. The steward had considerable conversational powers, and Tug was not a little attracted by the display of an accomplishment that he did not himself possess. It was not that Fenley had very much to impart. But he could talk readily and fluently about the most trifling matters. Moreover, he rarely used bad language—a rather exceptional characteristic this in a man-of-war—never told smutty tales, or even so much as smiled when he heard one told, never spoke lewdly about women, and generally spoke the thoughts he wished to convey in a perfectly correct manner. And Tug, although he had nothing of the prig about him, did find it at least a change to listen to talk that was not regularly punctuated with meaningless profanity. On the whole he judged Fenley to be a pretty good fellow, a trifle conceited, one might say, but not more so, perhaps, than one of his character and accomplishments had a right to be.

There was one subject on which Fenley liked to dwell. He possessed, according to his own modest account of himself, a considerable attraction for the opposite sex; and he was always prepared to dilate upon that, not in a boastful spirit, but more through a modest and hesitating recital of incidents which nevertheless conveyed a pretty broad implication. There was not the least suggestion of impropriety, at any rate on his own part, ever conveyed by his

anecdotes. His thoughts and actions were always beyond reproach. It was simply that women appeared to be fascinated by his personality.

Fenley was serving in the Navy for the duration of the War. In peace-time he had been a steward in the service of the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company. He had mentioned this fact casually during the course of one of his anecdotes. It was chiefly the wives and daughters of Indian officials and trading magnates travelling to and from the East who appeared to fall under the influence of his personal magnetism.

"I don't know what they can see about me," he once said with a large modesty. "But the women all seem to take to me to an extrord'n'ry extent. I'm not saying anything about myself, but really it's embarrassing to a servant of the Company like meself. Of course, we 'ave to make ourselves agreeable. It wouldn't do to altogether repulse their advances, or they'd take offence and travel by some other line. But I 'ave to be on me guard and not let meself be carried away, so to speak."

"You get pots of money in tips and all that sort of thing, don't you?" inquired Tug.

"Well, we do pretty well in some boats. Not all. It all depends on the service."

The recollection of his pecuniary gains at once let loose a train of reminiscences. In one of them he recounted an incident that occurred in the *Funkempore*, a recital which had for its primary purpose the reflection of his own character in a high moral light for Tug's special benefit.

"P'raps you don't know," he said, "but it's a pretty well-known fact that in the tropics some of the passengers do get a bit randy at times, and it's up to some of us to watch points and see that the ship don't get a bad name. One night, somewhere between Aden and Bombay, me and a quartermaster chap were going quietly round the boat-deck, and there, under one of the port lifeboats, what should we see but a couple all mixed up together on a blanket. It was the quartermaster spotted them. He called to me quietly, and when I came up I switched on an electric torch I 'ad with me. It was proper disgraceful. The man got up quite cool, if you please, and said: 'All right, you needn't wait.'

"The quartermaster said: 'I'm sorry, sir, but I'll 'ave to report this to the skipper.'

"The feller said: 'I don't think you need to.' And then he offered him ten bob.

"The quartermaster said: 'What! D'ye think I'm going to take bribes?'

"Then the feller said something about: 'Go to the devil, then.'

"At that moment I chipped in. 'You haven't forgotten the lady, have you, sir?' I said. 'Do you realize what her position will be? It's not going to be very nice for her.'

"She then got up and tugged his arm. They whispered together for quite a long time. I 'eard 'im say something about leaving it to 'im, and she said: 'No, no,' quite loudly. *I* didn't want to say anything. I didn't like it at all.

"In the end he gave us five pound apiece. We

didn't want to take it. But," he added after a pause, "we saved them a nasty scandal, and I think they ought to have been grateful. It wasn't a nice thing to 'ave on a ship."

The speaker puffed himself up and looked round as from a moral pedestal of great height. It was clear that the steward was completely unconscious of his own abominable villainy. It was perfectly patent, however, to Tug, and although he was, least of all men, inclined to comment on the conduct of others, he could not refrain from speaking his mind on this occasion.

"Five quid?" he said. "D'ye mean you each took five quid to keep your gate shut? Why, that was blackmail."

The steward all at once got furiously angry, and his face turned a vivid red.

"Blackmail? What d'ye mean, blackmail?" he shouted. "Of course, it wasn't nothing of the sort. We didn't ask for his money. We didn't *demand* it. How d'ye make it out to be blackmail?"

"You didn't ask for it, perhaps. But you took it, all the same," said Tug.

"Of course we took it. Wouldn't you? Would you 'ave been such a wet b——?" He didn't say the word; he began the sentence all over again. "Would you have refused it? Not you."

Tug did not think it worth while to reply, and the affronted steward turned away and left him. So annoyed was he that he did not seek Tug's company again.

Tug spent about a month watchkeeping on the

auxiliary boiler. He had no further reason to complain of the conduct of Petty Officer Bayliss, and when the senior engineer asked the chief stoker for a report on Tug's ability as a fireman, the result was considered satisfactory. As a result he was taken off watchkeeping and put to day-work in the stokehold, which meant cleaning out boilers and bilges, cleaning and polishing the brass and copper work of the feed pumps, washing down and painting boiler-room bulkheads, and any other sort of job that the cleanliness and efficiency of the stokehold demanded. It also meant an unbroken night's rest every night, a thing ordinarily denied to watchkeepers. Shortly afterwards he was rated First-Class Stoker.

About this time there came to Tug's ears rumours of projected movements up-country in regard to which, it was said, the Navy was likely to take an active part. To these rumours he paid little attention at the time. Before very long, however, there came intelligence of a more definite character. It became known that an armed party was to be sent from the ship immediately, though for what purpose was not yet divulged. In this party Tug, to his surprise, was included; and it was with a kind of happy anticipation that he turned his thoughts to what he conceived to be an interesting and, on the whole, a pleasurable experience.

CHAPTER XIII

SHORE PARTY

"SHINER WRIGHT, you'll get yer gear together an' be ready to leave the ship at nine o'clock to-morrow forenoon. Fall in on the upper deck, starboard side, at nine o'clock; Ngungo party. Wilson, you, too. And Mallett and Binns. Anyone seen Binns?"

The chief stoker glanced round the mess-deck.

"Gorn ashore with Nobby Clark, E.R.A.," a stoker responded. "Dishin' up the motor-boat way back at Elala."

"Tell 'im I want to see 'im when 'e comes aboard."

The chief stoker gave this order to the occupants of the mess-deck generally.

"Ten, eleven, an' Binns. That'll make the twelve." He departed, conning a list in his hand.

"What's the gag?" Shiner Wright asked Mallett, his nearest neighbour.

"I dunno. I 'eard they was sending a party to Ngungo. Expect a dust-up with the 'Uns or some-think. I didn't know there was any dustmen goin'."

Shiner hoisted his big carcass from the mess-stool on which he was sprawling and walked along the deck to the tiled wash-place set apart for the stokers. Opening a locker he drew forth a pair of coal-dust-stained fearnought trousers and a soiled singlet.

"I'll 'ave to dhobie these out now," he muttered to himself. "Gawd knows when I'll git the chance to do 'em if I don't do 'em now."

A few minutes later he was kneeling on the fo'c'sle, a bucket of water in front of him, rubbing soapy water into his soiled stokehold garments. A stream of blackened soapsuds trickled slowly away from him along the deck, to find its way eventually into the scuppers.

Just under the fo'c'sle on the starboard side of the ship was a small store-room occupied by the lamp trimmer. Lampy was one of those truly handy men that one frequently finds in a ship, with an enormous fund of practical experience. He could be depended upon to set right in the smallest possible time any chance defect in all kinds of objects of everyday use. By virtue of this useful faculty he was in very great demand, especially by the officers of the ship, who did not hesitate to call in his services for their private use and comfort. If a book cover broke away from its moorings it was: "See Lampy about it." If a gramophone wanted dishing up, no one was better qualified to take the job in hand than Lampy.

Just about this time, Lampy had received the honour of a visit from the officer of the day. Lieutenant Basil Gaiseric de Launay Casson was a smallish, dark-haired individual, with a rather high-pitched voice. Usually, when he spoke, he used more words than his fellow-officers thought absolutely necessary. The sailors called him "Lieutenant Gate", thereby bestowing on him the name commonly used among themselves to denote "too much to say".

The lieutenant had just deposited with Lampy the base of a German shell cartridge-case and a length of brass wire. He had also given Lampy ample instructions how to weld these two objects together to form an artistic ash-tray of his own design. Having satisfactorily disposed of this matter he dusted his white uniform jacket and came out from the store-room on to the deck outside.

As he emerged, Shiner Wright appeared at the ship's side near the break of the fo'c'sle and vigorously shook a pair of water-laden fearnought trousers. A few drops of water fell on the snow-white jacket of the officer on the deck below. Looking up, Casson caught sight of the stoker.

"You filthy hound," he shouted. Then in a tempest of wrath he ascended the ladder to the fo'c'sle.

"What do you mean by shaking your filthy muck over me, ye useless bilge-wallowing bung?" He was very angry indeed. His eye then lighted on Shiner's soap-suds smeared along the deck.

"What a disgusting mess," he said sourly. "Don't you know better than to smudge up the fo'c'sle in this filthy way? It's perfectly disgraceful. What sort of a tramp have you come from? Clear up that horrible mess at once."

At that moment a quartermaster came for'ard along the upper deck, a tiny bos'n's whistle pressed to his lips.

"'Ands o' the mess fer spuds," he bawled.

The officer beckoned to the quartermaster.

"See that this man clears up all this mess and

properly cleans the deck with a holystone. Let me know in half an hour's time. If it isn't properly done I'll put him in the report."

The officer rubbed his hands together quickly as though he had been handling some repulsive substance and went down the ladder.

Shiner turned away without a word and picked up his bucket. He was literally speechless, not from any respect for the officer, but on account of his all-devouring rage.

The quartermaster winked at the stoker. Then he bent down over the small fo'c'sle hatch and blew a long, thin blast on his whistle.

"'Ands o' the mess fer *po-tatoes*."

A small gurgle of explosive mirth came up the hatchway.

"Brass-mounted bleeder," muttered Shiner. "One o' these days I'll crown 'im with a 'andspike."

Tug heard the pipe while he was engaged in getting together a few necessary articles for his approaching departure from the ship. Being mess cook that day he had to abandon his preparations for the time being and proceed to draw the allowance for his mess for the following day. Accordingly he grabbed a mess kettle and went on deck to where, outside a small compartment which was used as the butcher's store-room under the fore and aft bridge, the ship's butcher, a big marine, was shovelling up potatoes on to a large pair of scales. A victualling steward, with the assistance of a note-book and a piece of pencil, stood beside him, checking the allowance for each mess. A small queue of mess cooks, equipped like Tug,

awaited their turn to draw their mess allowance.

Tug took his place in the queue and awaited his turn, gradually drawing nearer to the scales as each of the cooks received the allowance and departed. Each one, as his turn came, called out the number of his mess or its designation if it had no number.

“Six Mess.”

The steward consulted his book.

“Eight pounds,” he said to the marine.

“Chief P.O.’s Mess.” The same routine was gone through.

“Fifteen Mess.” “Eight Mess.”

“Jaunty’s Mess.”

“Put some poison in it,” shouted a voice from the queue.

The man immediately in front of Tug was a short, black-haired stoker with a complexion that looked as if some of the coal-dust which he so often handled had got beneath his skin. His face was dotted with innumerable black spots. He belonged to a mess whose members had been segregated on account of their having contracted some form of venereal disease. Put on light duty, they were receiving daily treatment from the sick bay. When this man’s turn came to be served he threw down his kettle with a loud clatter, as if he feared that his presence in that assembly might pass unnoticed.

“Rotten Mess,” he bawled with great gusto. Then he looked round for the approbation of the other men, and, strange as it may sound, his sally was received with delighted applause.

One might think that a person in his plight would be one of the last to advertise his condition, but such is the queer conceit of a certain class of sailormen that they feel they must lose no opportunity of boasting about it.

After receiving his allowance of potatoes, Tug returned to the mess. There he was accosted by the stoker Binns, who had just returned on board.

"What's this abaht a shore party?" Binns said to him.

"I don't know anything about it, my son," replied Tug, "except that I'm goin'. It'll be a change from clinker-knocking in the dust'-ole, anyway."

In truth Tug was rather fired with the idea of going on a land expedition somewhere up-country. The idea was distinctly picturesque. This featureless part of the river where the ship lay at anchor, with the vista of corrugated iron sheds on the nearer shore and mud flats in the distance, had long ago lost what little interest it had ever had for him. Here was a chance of really seeing something of Africa. The prospect of a brush with the niggers was not altogether distasteful to him. He saw no reason why he should be afraid of niggers. They did not seem to count for very much out here from what he had seen. They appeared to be on the whole a good-natured crowd; but they were very servile. One shouted to them and they scattered. They weren't allowed even to give back answers. A white man spoke to them with authority and said "one time", which meant "now", "at once", and the niggers always obeyed with

alacrity. No, he didn't feel at all afraid of tackling a whole mob of them single-handed.

On the following morning, at nine o'clock, he fell in with the rest of the party on the upper-deck. Each man was clad in khaki drill shirt and shorts and puttees, while on his head was a flat-crowned sun-helmet, with the ship's tally ribbon tied round the bottom of the crown. A service rifle and bayonet were served out to each man, together with a quantity of ammunition. Lieutenant Casson, similarly attired, but wearing blue shoulder-straps, with two gold stripes, and carrying a sword and revolver, looking tremendously important, walked up and down the ranks, stopping now and then to criticize a man's equipment, or make some observation on his general appearance.

A small squad of marines, looking very spick and span in their khaki drill uniforms, stood at the end of the line. They also formed part of the expeditionary force, and probably the most efficient part of it.

Shortly before ten o'clock the lieutenant received some final verbal instructions and advice from the commander, an order was given, and the members of the expedition moved one by one by means of a brow on to the deck of a flat-bottomed, stern-wheeled steamer that lay tied up alongside.

They were a curious collection got together hurriedly, and, it must be confessed, rather at haphazard. The stokers, who numbered a round dozen, were the least of all used to this sort of thing. Theoretically it was a part of their training to fit

themselves for land operations. In practice the occasions when they were so employed were so rare that nothing had been done to keep them in an efficient condition for such a service. Indeed, in the case of those stokers who had joined solely for the duration of the War, instruction in the use of small arms had been dispensed with altogether.

Nevertheless, it was not the first time that Tug had had a rifle in his hand. One forenoon when he was in training at Chatham he had been marched away from the depot to the lines above the town, there to take part in "manœuvres", as the couple of hours of rather aimless skirmishing was officially termed. Neither on that occasion nor on this one was he given the smallest instruction in the use of the weapon in his hands. At Chatham, however, he had no enemies to kill, and, except for the chance prospect of accidentally clubbing one of his neighbours in the eye with the butt-end of his rifle, or impaling himself on the bayonet, the man-killing device in his exclusive charge was rendered comparatively innocuous by the absence of ammunition. But now he had a full magazine and some fifty rounds disposed about his person. True, there was no blood-lust in his eye as yet, but his almost blank ignorance of the possibilities of his weapon constituted yet another danger to the sum total which the climate, the mosquitoes, the swamps, and the bullets of the foe held out to the members of the expedition.

It occurred to neither the commander of the force, nor to Ames, the gunner's-mate, who was his second in command, to satisfy themselves that all of their

men knew what they were about with the firearms in their charge. Both took it for granted that they all knew perfectly well what to do. If not, doubtless they would be able to tell them when the time came. For the time being—well, Jack was a handy man. That was traditional.

As for Tug, he did not feel inclined to ask any questions. His shipmates did not encourage questioning about the nature of their duties, as he knew from sharp experience. He had found very early in his Naval career that one was not expected to ask too many questions about matters connected with the routine of the ship. To do so almost invariably brought forth a “sarky” reply, which got him no nearer. He had not forgotten a trifling incident that happened on the upper-deck of the *Antares* one evening during the last dog watch. The quartermaster had struck two sharp strokes on the ship’s bell at seven o’clock. Tug had got it into his head that the time was six bells. His timid inquiry of the quartermaster as to whether he was giving the time, had brought forth an irate reply:

“What d’ye think I’m ringing it for? A bleed’n wedding?”

In due course the steamer cast off, the paddle-wheel revolved, and there commenced what was to these men a journey of unknown length into an unknown country, for a purpose of which few of them had any idea, and from which by far the larger number of them were never to return.

CHAPTER XIV

NGUNGO FORT

THE fort of Ngungo was erected on a piece of sloping ground a few hundred yards from the river bank. The bush had been cleared in the immediate neighbourhood, but in either direction it extended right to the river bank. The fringe of the bush formed an irregular arc, of which the fort was roughly the centre. The ground sloped gradually upward from the river, rising at a distance of less than a mile into a succession of low, bush-covered hillocks.

The so-called fort was not really a formidable affair. It consisted of a few corrugated iron buildings, surrounded by a loopholed stockade. The whole was further encompassed by a shallow ditch filled for the most part with stagnant, scummy water.

The importance of this small post lay in the fact that it immediately commanded the only part of the river for a distance of over sixty miles in either direction which was fordable at this time of the year. On the opposite side was a wide territory, largely cleared, and rather thickly populated. It afforded a fairly easy land route to the coast settlements. The desirability, from the German point of view, of acquiring possession of this post was obvious.

The place was garrisoned by a single company of

West African Rifles, under the command of Captain Reginald Mayhew.

It was getting towards dusk when the flat-bottomed, stern-wheeled steamer *Foulla* tied up at a small jetty close to the fort, and discharged a small complement of some fifty Naval ratings, under the command of Lieutenant de Launay Casson, of H.M.S. *Agesilaus*. They were a mixed assortment of seamen, marines, and stokers, and they had been sent here for the purpose of strengthening the garrison.

Native spies and runners had recently brought information that a hostile detachment had been observed moving in the direction of Ngungo. This force was not numerous, but the danger of a surprise raid on this important post was not to be disregarded. The danger was not considered to be very great, but it was thought desirable to throw a small reinforcement into the place, as the original garrison was not wholly adequate to defend it in the event of a determined attack. Hence the small expedition from the *Agesilaus*.

Captain Mayhew, the commander-in-chief of the tiny fortress, was a long, willowy person, with a light skin, pale blue eyes, and a fair moustache. Besides the Naval officer, he had as assistant an Army lieutenant, a person who had most obviously risen from the ranks. Lieutenant Graydon was a large-featured bullock of a man, with a very strong propensity for swearing at his nigger rank and file, to whom he was fond of referring as "black sons of 'Am".

In a fairly large corrugated-iron shed the fifty odd

Naval ratings congregated at their ease. They had just finished supper. Ames, the gunner's-mate, presided over the mixed assembly.

"Well, this is a 'ome from 'ome," Zonker Mallett observed, as he stretched his carcase on the dry mud floor.

"Dunno abaht 'ome," replied the Cockney, Binns. "'Ow are we goin' to git on fer water fer dhobi-in'? That long, skinny orficer said we wasn't on no accahnt to go dahn to the river. An' only three quarts *per* man *per* day. We was better orf in the 'Aggie'."

It should be observed that sailors will almost invariably find some drawback in any situation in which they may find themselves, no matter how satisfactory that situation may be in other respects.

"This reminds me o' when I was ashore at Ning-po," Binns went on. "That was no 'ome from 'ome; not by a long chalk, it wasn't."

"This is nothing like what we 'ad at Ning-po," he then added, somewhat contradictorily. "That was a rotten 'ole, if yer like."

"What've they fetched us out 'ere for, anyway?" asked Shiner Wright, who felt like a large fish in shallow water.

The door at the end of the shed opened at that moment, and Lieutenant Casson came in for a short visit of inspection.

"This place is disgustingly untidy," he said at once to Ames. "Get them to clear this filthy mess away at once. Don't forget we have evening quarters at eight o'clock. I want to see everything shipshape."

Then he turned to the mixed crowd of seamen, stokers, and marines.

"You fellows mustn't imagine you're up here for a rest cure," he said. "This isn't a convalescent home. You're here to defend the place, and hold it in the event of hostile attack. I want to see complete all-round efficiency. You mustn't let those black bastards think they can teach British sailors smartness. I'm going to have every ounce out of you. If anyone defaults, he'll know all about it when we get back to the ship."

Ames, as in duty bound, put forth a string of complaints to the officer. Personally he had nothing to complain about, but he had listened to the comments of the men, and he had been to a certain extent egged on by a few of them to make their grievances known to the officer in charge. To have said nothing would have laid himself open to the charge of being afraid to stick up for himself. Sailors have an opprobrious epithet for such a person.

"Everything all right?" asked Casson casually. He did not listen for any reply, but moved away to the other end of the room, at the same time glancing about for something on which he could fasten for the purpose of recording his official disapproval. The question, in his estimation, did not require an answer. It was more a remark made as a matter of form.

But Ames was a bulldog, or nothing at all. He followed up the officer.

"Well, sir. There's just one matter," he said. And then he began a recital of half a dozen matters in quick succession.

"Eh?" said Casson, stopping dead in ostentatious surprise.

"We're rather crowded 'ere, sir." Ames repeated the first of his complaints.

"Yes, yes. I know all about that. I'm afraid it can't be helped, though. Don't forget evening quarters. Get everything shipshape."

"There's 'ardly enough water——"

"My dear man, of course we can't expect everything we want in a place like this. I'd like more of this and more of that. I've got to go short. You've got to go short. We've all got to go short. It's an emergency, and we've got to make the best of it, I'm afraid. Get them on clearing the place up. It's fearfully untidy."

Shortly afterwards he went out as fussily as he came in.

"Mouthy swine," growled Shiner. "What a gate!"

The lieutenant's orations had the effect of putting the stokers' detachment in a thoroughly bad humour. Above everything else they disliked being lectured by these upper-deck, brass-mounted sons of Heaven. Up to now they had been passably pleased with their new situation. Henceforth they had no word bad enough for the whole dump. When Binns labelled it "The Black 'Ole o' Calcutta", this name at once caught on, and henceforth it was known by none other. They found fault with every feature of the place. It was lousy; it was un'andy; it was 'ot; it was a 'ole. The Black 'Ole of Calcutta! What a place to fetch ocean-going dustmen to!"

"It's a rotten 'ole," said Binns. "But it ain't nothing like what we 'ad at Ning-po. Gawd, that was a dump."

"We just about earn our 'ard lyers," said Shiner Wright. "Not 'alf."

Hard lyers, it may be necessary to explain, is the name given to the extra sixpence a day allowed to shore-going men in situations where they cannot use their hammocks for sleeping. It is more correctly known to Navy Regulations as "hard-lying money".

"And we ain't allowed to git water from the river for dhobi-in'," he added, as this extra grievance struck his memory. "Why not? Does that long streak of orf-shore wind own the bleed'n river and all the bleed'n rights? Why don't 'e put a glass cover over it, and feed goldfish?"

"Yus. But it ain't nothing like Ning-po," interrupted Binns, who was full up to overflowing with recollections of that man-killing Chinese resort.

In another part of the fort the three officers languidly discussed the situation.

"Merely a precautionary measure," Mayhew said to Casson. "They won't attack us seriously; you can depend on that. They can't do a thing; they're not strong enough. We know all about them."

From the reports received, he informed him, the hostile force numbered somewhere between one hundred and one hundred and fifty regular native troops. But they had no artillery; and without artillery a much larger force than they were known to be would be needed to attack the place.

"As a matter of fact, I only wish they would

attack us," said Mayhew. "It would settle their hash completely if they did. The *Foulla* will be up this way again in about a week's time with two companies of the West India Regiment, and the other draft of your fellows with the gun, you know. They're not coming here, though. They'll land at Boto, about twenty miles down the river, and march inland to intercept them, don't-cher-know."

"Are your people pretty comfortable?" inquired Mayhew, after a lengthy pause.

"Oh, yes; I think so. I've had the usual string of complaints. They've not enough room, for one thing, they say. Not enough room! They've got about ten times as much space as they had in the ship. Sailors will complain, whatever you give them."

"The place is a little bit crowded, I'm afraid," said Mayhew. "It can't be helped, though. It was never designed to accommodate more than about a hundred men, all told."

"How long have you been up here?"

"Close on four months altogether."

"Find it pretty dull?"

Mayhew shrugged his shoulders.

"I've been on the Coast now for over four years, with only three short spells away. The last time was nearly eighteen months ago. I've got pretty well used to it, I should say. There are much worse places than this, though."

"So I suppose," said Casson, yawning. "I reckon I'd be dead after four months of it here. By Jove, fancy being in Piccadilly now!"

“Don’t talk about it. Sometimes I feel I could swap places with a private in the Guards to be able to stroll through the West End.”

Casson yawned again. Shortly afterwards he got up and retired to his berth.

In the warm darkness outside the sentries trod their monotonous parade. Tug found himself posted a sentry at the north-east corner of the stockade. Of all the strange happenings that had come to him since he left his home in Dalston to take part in the War he found this one of doing sentry-go at night-time in the African bush the most strange of all. After he had once got used to his surroundings on board ship everything that happened there had seemed to come as a matter of course. Even when his abode was violently taken from him on the occasion when the *Antares* was torpedoed, it seemed to him almost as if such things had to be.

But now, treading warily in the dark on this warm night, in an atmosphere laden with peculiar and overpowering scents, he felt as if he had been miraculously transported to another state of being. What would they say at home if they could see him now?

It was a favourite humour of his, when he found himself fairly quiet in some unusual situation, to bring before his imagination, one by one, the few friends and acquaintances that he possessed at home, and to wonder what this one or that might think of him as he was situated at the moment.

His reverie was interrupted by the Army officer, Lieutenant Graydon, who, good soldier that he was, had determined that no lack of vigilance on his part

should endanger the post, and who, therefore, made these rounds to inspect the outposts more often than the strict letter of his instructions required of him. Having repeated the counter-sign, he stood for a short while beside Tug.

"Everything all right, Jack?"

"Yes, sir," answered Tug.

The officer lit a cigarette and inhaled two or three times.

"A bit of a change from on board ship, eh?"

"Yes, sir. I'm not much used to this."

"You're not windy, are you?"

"No, sir. It's a bit strange, that's all."

"Well, I *have* known white men to get the wind up doing sentry out here. Nothing's likely to happen to-night; but keep your eyes skinned, all the same. You wouldn't object to a bit of a scrap just to liven things up, I suppose?"

"No, sir. Is there likely to be any fighting?"

"Who knows? As likely as not. Nothing to hurt us, though. They'll get more than they bargain for if they come here, the black swines."

"Don't forget to keep your eyes skinned," he said, as he turned away.

Once more Tug was alone with his thoughts. But this time his thoughts were not of home and the people there. The words of the officer had brought back to him the reason for his being placed here by this stockade. Somewhere beyond that black wall of bush yonder, how near or how far he could not know, black enemies, armed as he was, were approaching with stealth, their object being to kill him if they

could, and all his shipmates and companions. The realization sharpened his faculties. He was not put there to dream about home. There was danger lurking in that blackness, and he was there to watch out and give warning. Instead of that he had been dopey. His inexperience guided him now to the other extreme. He became hypersensitive on account of his extreme watchfulness. Noises hitherto unnoticed now began to have a sinister meaning. Black and shapeless outlines took to themselves the shapes of crawling niggers. For a few moments he became almost panicky. A cold sweat broke out all over him. Once he was on the point of firing at a motionless object close to him, which proved after a minute's intense regard to be nothing more dangerous than an old and worn-out iron bucket, which had been discarded and flung over the palisade a few days before. The realization of the absurdity of his fears brought him up to scratch again immediately. So relieved was he that he was impelled to give the offending bucket a kick, a method of relieving his feelings that raised such a clatter that it came near to raising an alarm within the fort. Indeed, another of the sentries came quickly on the scene in an attitude of intense and warlike preparation. He was an Irish seaman who had been posted at an adjacent corner of the stockade.

"What t'hell was that?" he gasped.

"Nothing; only a bucket," responded Tug.

"Holy Jasus! I thought it was *them* come to cause a dishthurbance at this time of night. Phwat caused the bucket, anyway?"

"I kicked against it."

“Kicked against it! Jasus! If it'd been *them*!”

He went back to his post, and Tug heard him muttering to himself, “Kicked against it” and “Jasus” several times over as he went.

Once more all was comparatively quiet. A low murmur of insect noises, occasional croakings from the river, now and then an unexpected splash in the muddy waters—all the weird and wonderful sounds of night-time in equatorial Africa held their dominion. Otherwise silence reigned over the settlement and the dark forest around brooded over its secrets.

CHAPTER XV

THE RETURN OF THE "FOULLA"

"I'm sure that's gun-fire."

Lieutenant-Commander Langside listened intently, but made no reply.

Major Goddard, of the West India Regiment, took hold of his elbow, and drew him away.

"Come along here away from this racket. We shall hear better," he said. "I'm certain it's guns."

The two officers walked a couple of hundred yards along the river bank, away from the landing-stage at Boto, where the *Foulla* was discharging her cargo of reinforcements.

"You may be right," said the Naval officer at last. "But, if so, where the devil can it be? It can't be Ngungo."

"Why can't it?"

"Why, they've no artillery."

"They haven't, I know; but the Huns may have. That's Ngungo, all right. I'll stake my commission on it."

"Well, God help Casson and his crowd if that's the case. They won't stand an earthly there. The place is made of cardboard."

Nearly a week had elapsed since the *Foulla* had returned from Ngungo, and here she was again barely

twenty miles from the fort with the promised reinforcements which had been assembled for the purpose of smashing the German raiders.

Black West Indian soldiers were filing along the gang-plank from the steamer to the shore. On the river-bank a miscellaneous assortment of khaki-clad Naval ratings stood about in groups, smoking fags, and gazing with a sort of wonder at the surrounding forest.

The two officers hastily returned to the landing-stage. The debarkation was countermanded. Major Goddard considered the circumstances good enough for him to depart from the letter of his instructions, and he determined to proceed with all haste to Ngungo. Accordingly the black troops and the sailors were marched back on board, not, be it said, without a few outspoken comments on the proceedings from some of the Naval members of the expedition.

"Abaht turn," one ejaculated, as he started to move towards the gang-plank.

"They mistaken the rout," said another. "They got the signpost arse uppards."

"That'll do from you, Marshall," said Langside, who was standing by the gang-plank. "Get on board, and not so much cackle."

With all the speed that they could make, it was nearly three hours when the *Foulla* came in sight of Ngungo. At one time during her passage up the river the sound of gun-fire had been distinctly heard by all on board; but that had ceased more than an hour ago, and all was now astonishingly quiet. As

the *Foulla* rounded the last bend of the river, it was seen that the jetty was deserted; nor could the closest scrutiny disclose the presence of any living soul on the shore. When they got nearer to the fort, or what remained of it, the expeditionary force were able to make a pretty good guess as to what had been happening. The place was simply a heap of dirt and scrap iron. It was obvious that the post had been subjected to a heavy bombardment, and pounded into rubbish. They also perceived that the whole area, both inside and out the one-time enclosure, was littered with human bodies. But not an active living soul was to be seen.

The steamer went alongside the jetty. Goddard and Langside quickly landed their men. No shot was fired at them; no sounds were heard. There was no hostile demonstration of any sort. There were no movements of men; nothing seemed to be living. The surrounding forest was silent and still. It was a sinister silence, and the relievers felt a dire foreboding as they stepped on the shore.

Warily they approached the remains of the fort. Scouting parties were sent to the fringe of the forest. But no opposition or interference was encountered. They found instead considerable evidence of a hurried retreat. Ammunition-cases lay abandoned, and a quantity of unexpended ammunition was found. Even a few of the enemy wounded had been left among the dead where they had fallen.

Goddard and Langside strode through the ruins. Stretcher-parties were soon at work, for there were many wounded men, both black and white, inside the

enclosure. By far the majority of these, however, were long past surgical aid. They were all British. Not a single enemy, either killed or wounded, was to be found inside the fort. But this was not the only evidence of an obstinate resistance. Propped upright, amid a litter of rubbish, was a broken-off fragment of a flagstaff; and nailed to the top of it were the tattered remnants of a drooping, though still defiant, ensign. The Union Jack still floated over the ruins. Battered and smashed to bits as it was, with all its garrison massacred, it was nevertheless perfectly clear that *the enemy had not entered the place.*

Scores of dead bodies were lying about the slopes outside the smashed stockade, but no enemy had succeeded in reaching the fort. Here was something mysterious and incomprehensible. The enemy had destroyed the garrison, yet they had failed to take the fort. They had left the place, and gone away; retreated, apparently, the way they had come. Why?

"This is a queer business, if you like," said Langside. "Every man Jack of them wiped out, and the enemy skidaddled."

"What the deuce is the meaning of it?" said Goddard. "They just bashed it all up, and cleared. Why didn't they enter the place? What scared them off? And where the devil are they now? It positively beats anything I've ever heard of."

CHAPTER XVI

A DUST-UP WITH THE 'UNS

CAPTAIN MAYHEW was pondering over a message he had just received. Some advanced scouts of the enemy had been seen approaching the forest strip less than thirty kilometres away from the fort.

"They're getting close," he said to Casson. "Much closer than I thought they would. Well, let them come. So much the worse for them."

The enemy were certainly venturing very near; but, comfortable in their assurance of their ability to beat them off, the officers of the small garrison were not greatly perturbed by the report. As Mayhew had said, they knew all about this force, and what it was capable of doing. Amply provided, as they considered they were, against anything in the nature of a surprise raid, they were confident that these people would not venture on a serious assault. But what they did not know was that there was preparing higher up the river, with a secrecy that the enshrouding bush made possible, a sledge-hammer stroke that Ngungo and all it contained had small means of withstanding.

About one hundred and fifty miles above Ngungo was the small settlement of Banja; and here the Germans had established for the time being an important military post. To the British, unfortunately,

little was known about this place and the forces concentrated there. It was too remote, and the intervening country too difficult of communication to be regarded as a serious factor in immediate operations. It was not deemed possible that a blow of any significance could be delivered from that quarter.

Nevertheless, the German governor and military commander had made preparations on a considerable scale for a very important expedition. His scheme was nothing less than a direct advance to the coast, where he hoped, by a bold stroke, to break the communications of his enemies, and thus spread disorganization among the various columns operating inland.

In pursuance of this scheme the Freiherr von Herwald-Bittenwald had left his headquarters at Banja with more than a thousand native troops and a number of white men, all thoroughly equipped, and in a state of high efficiency. He was advancing on Ngungo at the rate of over twenty kilometres a day, and he had for his immediate object the complete obliteration of the small garrison that lay astride the only practicable route to the coast.

It was just after dawn on the sixth day after the arrival of the Naval detachment that the garrison received a sudden order to stand to. There was most obviously a sudden alarm. The officers did not saunter about the enclosure as they had been wont to do; they *ran*.

A very few minutes after the bugle sounded the noise of rifle shots was heard. A black sergeant, on his tunic the ribbon of the D.C.M., came hastily into

the enclosure. Four native soldiers, carrying a wounded comrade like a sack of potatoes, came after him. This was an outpost that had been hastily recalled.

Before long the sound of rifle fire grew louder and much more intensified. The rattle of machine-guns added to the din. All the members of the garrison were at their posts, and a hot return fire was kept up on the bobbing black heads that now began to appear from time to time dotted about the grassy slope.

There could be no doubt about it; the attack was being made in considerable force. The fire was sustained in a manner that made it clear that the attackers were no slender detachment. And the fire was of deadly accuracy. A number of shots came through the loopholes, and several men were killed or disabled within a very short time.

"This is getting a bit warm, don't you think?" Casson said to his temporary chief.

"Ye—s," said Mayhew meditatively. He knew that the force attacking them must be greatly superior to his own.

And then there came that which astounded every officer and man of the garrison. It was the reverberating boom of a gun; and it was quickly followed by another. The first shot fell just outside the enclosure. It blew out a small pit in the sun-baked earth, and threw several large clods with a thump and a spatter against the stockade. The second was more accurately placed. It went clean through the iron roof of a small store shed, and exploded immediately.

The further wall was crumpled up, and chunks of

corrugated-iron were torn from the roof and flung outward. Other shells followed in quick succession. One of them exploded immediately beside the commandant of the fort. When the smoke and dust had cleared away, not a fragment of him was to be found.

After this shells began to fall into the enclosure at a very rapid rate. It was clear that the Germans possessed at least a battery of field guns, and were bent on smashing the ill-provided fort to bits.

Casson, on whom the command devolved, darted about from post to post, ordering here, threatening there. He was more fussy than ever.

"We must hang on somehow," he said to Graydon. "The *Foulla* may be back at any time. It'll be awful if they find the place in the possession of the enemy. We must hang on at all costs."

Graydon nodded. He had removed his shirt, and, clad only in shorts and singlet, was directing the working of a machine-gun.

Tug knelt before a loophole, using his rifle to the best of his ability. Despite the racket of bursting shells that went on behind him, he could hear the continual patter of rifle-bullets on the outside of the stockade near him. The fear that had taken possession of him at the commencement of the attack had somewhat died down; all he was conscious of now was a consuming excitement. Time after time he poked his rifle through the loophole and drew the trigger. He found the short, sharp, little explosions of his rifle satisfying; though whether he ever hit anything worth hitting he had no means of telling. Doubtless all of his shots found their billet in the

soil ahead. But firing, even at nothing in particular, had the effect of steadying his nerves, and kept him from paying too much attention to the devastating explosions that were going on around him.

The man on his right suddenly muttered "Christ!" and crouched down on the ground. Tug looked at him, and wondered for a moment or two what the fellow was up to contorting himself in that fashion. Only when the other continued to remain absolutely still in that position did it dawn on Tug that he was dead.

"'Ere comes the bloke again," said Binns, who knelt on the other side of Tug. "'E's forgotten something what 'e wanted to say."

"Take careful aim, my lads," said Casson, as he hurried up. "Don't waste the stuff. Mark your men."

A few moments later Tug was conscious of a terrific explosion somewhere above his head. The concussion bowled him right over, and nearly shook the life out of him. Earth and dust lay all over him. Dazed, he tried to get up. He couldn't. And then stabbing pains shot through his arms, his left shoulder, his right thigh, his head. He must be shot, he thought, shot through and through in numerous places. He was conscious of blood; blood all over him. He was a mass of blood; blood and pain. His sight grew dim; a fearful faintness came over him. He remembered no more.

The artillery bombardment was kept up for more than an hour. In that time the small post was pounded practically out of existence. Not a building,

not the smallest hut, remained intact. Curiously enough, the first to be hit—the small store-shed—was the only erection that preserved any appearance of its original shape. It had two crumpled walls, and a part of a third still standing precariously. These supported a sagging, shell-torn roof. The ground of the enclosure was a mass of pits and strewn rubbish. The stockade was smashed, and four-fifths levelled. The freiherr had directed his bombardment with Teutonic thoroughness. All that remained for him to do, apparently, was to occupy the place.

And what of the garrison? A big, red-faced Army lieutenant, in khaki shorts, with a bloody rag round his forehead, knelt behind a machine-gun amid a clutter of rubbish. He was the commandant. A black sergeant with the D.C.M., three black soldiers, a big stoker, a small one, two A.B.'s. These were the garrison. They were still defending the post.

At two points the enemy concentrated to rush the ruins. Lieutenant Graydon mounted on the top of what was once a corrugated-iron roof, and hastily surveyed the ground outside through a pair of binoculars. Then he jumped down again, and got busy with his garrison and his two remaining serviceable machine-guns.

"Come on, you black sons of 'Am. Lib for corner there one time. You, Uncle Joe, blast your liver, lib for corner. All right, Jack; stay where you are. They ain't got us yet. Nor they won't neither, damn their eyes."

So he placed his men. The twofold rush did not come off. Two streams of machine-gun bullets

withered away the heads of the attacking columns. But they got very near. They settled down again, hundreds of them, and began a storm of rifle and machine-gun fire on the shattered enclosure.

"We're gittin' it in the neck proper," observed the big stoker to the Cockney who knelt beside him.

The other gave a deep grunt, and put one hand to his stomach. His other hand, which held his rifle, relaxed, and the rifle tumbled to the ground. He opened his mouth to say something; then he gritted his teeth. Once more he tried hard to speak, but without success.

Then he rolled over.

CHAPTER XVII

SHINER LAST MAN OUT

FEW people knew precisely what function Harvey Greerson performed. He was generally suspected of being a trader of sorts. He was known by sight at several centres of white administration along the coast. He appeared to be well-known to various officers of the administration, both civil and military, and it was observed that he had ready access to these people at all times. He used to disappear for long intervals, but where he went, and what he did, were never more than a matter of speculation on the part of the vast majority of the white people of the coast.

As a matter of fact Greerson was wont at times to perform very long and hazardous journeys. Accompanied by a small and quick-moving train of black attendants, he would be missing from civilization for months at a stretch. His return was generally the signal for much palavar and head-wagging among the administrative officials.

It is one of these journeys which was of vast importance, unknown to them, to a detachment from the *Agesilaus*. Greerson had left Elala some three weeks before the departure of the small expedition from the *Agesilaus*. Of his hard and hazardous journey through a war-stricken territory, of his still harder progress through a bush-entangled no-man's

land further up country, and of how at length he emerged from the bush into the country of Umbungo, the savage and unenlightened chief of the Ngendi people, all this is another story. Suffice it to say here that within two days of his arrival at Ngendi he had negotiated a treaty with Umbungo, whereby that hard-bitten potentate undertook, in return for sundry cases of gin and a place in the sun, to supply for service in the interests of the Franco-British allies, one thousand "partisans", as his hereditary brigands were euphemistically termed.

A very few days after the settlement of this highly satisfactory negotiation Umbungo crossed the Ngendi River with his horde of cutthroats, and advanced on the Banja country. They met with no resistance whatsoever. The peace-loving inhabitants of the surrounding districts, who had not feared the insinuations of German culture, and who had remained entirely unmoved by the strains of the "Ride of the Valkyries" played to them by a propagandising German band, fled in dismay at the first mention of the approaching partisans.

Umbungo and his merry men had a walk-over all the way up to Banja. As before explained, in this small settlement was established the base of supplies of the force under Herwald-Bittenwald. The partisans found the place occupied by a meagre force of about fifty men; Bittenwald had collected every available man for his expedition. There was no fight; the partisans simply grabbed the lot. They had a time such as their race had not known within the memory of the oldest old man of the tribe.

From the strict point of view of military strategy their operations, after this dazzling capture, had no very great force. The enormous haul of loot that they acquired at Banja rather impaired their military usefulness. They displayed a tendency to rest on their laurels and fatten on their acquisitions.

However, there can be no question of the importance of the immediate effect of their capture. To Herwald-Bittenwald the news was brought by a native runner while he was directing the final flattening out of Ngungo, and he nearly had a fit. He took off his sun-helmet, and wiped his bald and shiny dome with a handkerchief. Ngungo was now his for the mere taking. But what was the use of Ngungo now, when his whole source of supply was taken away from him? What was the use of advancing any further when he would have his work cut out to maintain himself even where he was? There was no doubt about it; the whole scheme had gone kaput. It had been a bold scheme, and it promised well. But clearly the only thing to do now was to pack up and clear out.

Accordingly he directed the recall to be signalled. His men, at the moment, were just preparing the final stroke. No shots came from the battered ruins; but a single man—a big stoker—still functioned as the garrison. He was lugging at an overturned machine-gun. At last he got it on its legs, and crouched behind it. A short distance away from him a khaki-clad naval officer lay on his back. Both his legs were shattered. He had been lying there for a long time; he was thought to be dead. But at that moment his

head rolled over on one side, and his eyes opened. Filmy eyes they were, but as they caught sight of the stoker they lighted up. He half-raised himself, and spoke faintly.

"That's splendid, Wright. Take your time, boy. Don't hurry; mark your men." Then he gave a gasp and a cough, and flopped down again. A stray bullet had caught him, and closed his gate for ever.

Petty Officer Grimes approached Langside and saluted.

"There's one of our fellows layin' in that there shed, sir," he said. "'E ain't dead, an' 'e ain't wounded as far as I can see."

"Not dead and not wounded? What's the matter with him then? Why the devil don't you bring him along?"

"I think 'e's drunk, sir?"

Langside strode to the battered remains of the shed, followed by the petty officer. Sprawling on the ground inside, his mouth wide open, and breathing heavily, was First-class Stoker "Shiner" Wright, of His Majesty's Ship *Agesilaus*. The place reeked of the fumes of alcohol, and a large damp stain on the ground showed where a quantity of the spirit had been upset. The remains of a number of smashed rum bottles lay about the place. One of them, its neck broken off, and still holding a third of its original quantity of spirit, stood upright beside the drunken stoker.

The officer eyed the sprawling figure distastefully. And then a consuming wrath arose within him. He

knew this man Wright well enough: a drunkard, a useless wastrel. This was where they might expect such a bird to be, lying in the store-room, a drink-sodden lump of insensibility, while other and better men were giving their lives to defend the flag, and him. He turned to the petty officer.

“Put that drunken swine in the commander’s report. I’ll make it devilish hot for him when we get back to the ship.”

CHAPTER XVIII

CONVALESCENT

IN a large white-washed mission-room, high up on the slope of a mountain, a building that had been converted into a hospital, Tug Wilson was eventually brought back to consciousness and reason. Five shrapnel wounds, one of them on his temple, had made sad havoc of him. To add to the general wreck malarial fever had set in. For weeks it was a spin of the coin whether he ever regained consciousness or not. He had many days of delirium. He was reduced almost to the proverbial shadow, and it was a very frail and weak Tug Wilson who at length opened his eyes and wondered where he was and what had befallen him. He was far too weak to move, far too lethargic to seek information from the shadowy forms that occasionally moved around him. He slept for many long hours, and his waking periods, though free from pain, were intervals of dreadful languor which deprived him of all will to talk, or even to think.

But this state did not continue for very long. Tug had a strong constitution, and he had never made ill use of it. After some days a faint colour returned to his cheeks; the fearful debility gradually wore off; a little strength came back to him.

So they brought him back to life. In that cool and

comparatively healthful atmosphere his wounds healed. The terrible languor and weakness gradually departed; he recovered his strength. He was able to "sit up and take nourishment". His natural functions resumed their normal sway. He began to take an interest in things. The presence of white women—the two nurses who attended on the patients—brought to his mind once more the girl with whom he had once kept company in far-away England. When the surgeon paid his visit he came up to Tug.

"How are you feeling this morning?" he asked briskly.

"Much better," replied Tug.

"Yes. I should say you are, too. I think you might get up to-day."

And so Tug was able to go outside for a few hours each day. He walked in a garden where there were red roses; poor specimens they would be considered by a suburban grower at home, but roses they were without doubt, and they formed a subtle link with his own far-off land. As he grew stronger he went farther and farther afield. He caught a glimpse of the distant sea. In another direction he saw, far below him, a silver network of waterways entwined about dark patches of green, the islands and mangrove swamps of the river delta.

One morning while he was strolling down the road which led to the mission-house he saw approaching him a couple of white men mounted on harnessed mules. They were wearing khaki drill shirts and knickers, and Navy sun-helmets. When they came up he recognized one of them. He was a chief stoker

from his own ship, a man named Riley. The other, he found out afterwards, was a gunner's mate, one of the ship's company of the gunboat *Perker*.

Riley informed him that they were on four days' leave, that they had arrived the evening before, and that they were staying in a deserted German bungalow quite near.

"You should come along and give us a look up, Towney," Riley said to him. "We're 'aving a posh time. There's five of us altogether; me and Billing 'ere, two shipmates of 'is, and Porson, the chippy chap from the *'Aggie*'. We got a fine bungalow all to ourselves, and two niggers to wait on us. One bloke cooks like a chef, and we give 'im a mark and 'alf a day. Come along this afternoon. You can't miss it; it's a large yellow bungalow about 'alf a mile down the road. We'll give you tea and supper. We're just off now to fix up something else." He looked at Billing and laughed. "Well, so-long, Towney. See you later."

They waved their hands to Tug and rode on.

Tug had no difficulty in getting permission to visit his shipmates. The hospital rules were not at all strict, and he could come and go practically as he pleased. So to the bungalow he went after he had had a short nap in the afternoon.

They gave him a splendid tea. The black cook evidently earned his mark and a half a day. There was new bread and butter, coconut cake, a fruit salad with tinned cream, "alligator" pears, a fine pineapple, oranges, mangoes, guavas, and other tropical fruits. Tug enjoyed himself.

After tea they received a visit from a nigger dressed in spotless white drill. His name, Tug afterwards learned, was Whitehead. He spoke English fairly well, and Tug thought he must be a local official of some sort.

"You got everyting you want?" he asked the company.

"Yes. Everything O.K.," responded Billing, who appeared to be in charge of the party.

"I wanted get you some chickens, but dey no lib. Pig all right?"

"Yes; fine."

"I take de washup boy away to-morrow. But I get you nudder one."

"Right-o," said Billing.

"You doan wan' nutting more?"

"Yes. You can get us plenty black mammy," said Porson the chippy.

The nigger shook his head.

"Dey no lib. No get you black mammy, Tom." He shook his head again.

"Now I take a bit o' your baccy," he said, reaching out his hand towards an open tin that he had been eyeing for some time.

"Right-o. 'Elp yourself, George," said Billing hospitably. (It happened to be Riley's tobacco.)

After the departure of their black visitor the six men played pontoon for matches. Some bottles of beer were produced, and a mellow evening passed fairly quickly. It was late when Tug got up and announced his intention of returning to the hospital. But his hosts at once pressed him to stay the night.

"You can't go back there in this pitch blackness," said Riley. "You'll lose yer way as sure as eggs. And down the bottom there is lousy with centipedes at night-time. We've got a spare settee. You can kip down with us. I can lend yer a blanket."

Tug allowed himself to be persuaded, and about ten o'clock he turned in. His bed was the spare settee in the big living-room. There were two other couches in the room. These, he was informed, would be occupied by the two petty officers, Riley and Billing.

He was just beginning to doze when he was awakened by a sharp tap at the door. Riley and Billing, who were seated at the table smoking by the dull light of an oil lamp, at once got up, and Tug saw the former go quietly to the door and open it. He heard some murmuring, and then Riley spoke more loudly. He was addressing someone outside.

"She your sister? Other one your sister?"

Then Riley called to Billing:

"Got half a mark?"

Billing passed to him the coin, which he handed to someone at the door.

"'Ere you are. Now you lib for out. Come in, you two."

Riley opened the door wide and pulled into the room two negro girls swathed rather than dressed in some dark cotton fabric. He addressed one of them.

"You all same wash? You savvy clean?"

The girl nodded.

"You all wash, eh?"

Billing meanwhile took hold of the other girl and stripped her of her wrap.

"Eh. You'll do," he said. "You all same wash, eh?"

Riley went to the table and turned out the light.

CHAPTER XIX

WHITEHEAD'S BUNGALOW

ON the following day Tug, in company with Riley, Billing, and Porson, paid a visit to the bungalow occupied by the nigger agent, Whitehead. Whitehead was a native of Sierra Leone; he had recently come into the country following on the British occupation. The bungalow where he lived was a delightful place. It was perched on the slope of a hill and overlooked the distant sea. The view of the blue ocean seen over the top of an undulating expanse of forest greenery was particularly attractive from that situation. No craft was to be seen upon it. If there were any they were far too distant to be observed with the naked eye.

That far-distant background to the waving tree-tops made a picture such as no viewpoint in northern climes could afford. One would have called it blue, and a very beautiful blue it was indeed. But it was not quite all blue. The vivid ultramarine of the nearer part, which formed such a charming contrast to the varied greens of the forest tops, gradually faded in the distance, first to a lighter blue, then to a heliotrope, which in its turn paled as it receded until it all but faded out on the horizon. For all that the horizon was sharply defined, though it must have been many leagues distant.

No Englishman who has spent a long exile in

tropical Africa can view the sea without a gladdening of the heart. Tug Wilson and his companions, as they moved towards the small bungalow on the hill-side, had to pause for a few moments to gaze with a speechless longing towards the distant ocean that smiled at them an invitation. On that broad and blue expanse was the highway to home.

Around the bungalow was a garden filled with wonderful plants such as Tug had never seen the like before. One of them particularly engaged his attention. It reminded him of a golden fountain, a firework that he had seen let off one Fifth of November. Whether the golden mass that he now beheld formed the flowers of the plant or merely the fronds he was unable to determine.

Close to the bungalow and tied up to the stem of a pawpaw tree was a very small goat which the sailors no sooner perceived than they one and all gathered round it. Billing dropped on one knee and began to caress it. Riley gave it a cigarette, which it at once devoured with seeming relish.

In the garden a nigger, dressed in white shorts and grey singlet, was hoeing the ground. Now and again he hummed a short tune with monotonous repetition. To Tug the tune sounded like the first few notes of a bugle-call; actually it was the Sword *motif* from the "Nibelung's Ring". How often must that tune have been played in the improvised bandstand not far away by the erstwhile German masters of this region in order that it could penetrate the thick skull of the half-savage nigger and stay there!

Billing hailed the nigger :

“ Massa Whitehead lib?”

The nigger looked up for a few moments, gave them a blank stare of incomprehension, and shook his head. He then resumed his hoeing. The door of the bungalow was shut and fastened, and to their repeated knocks there was no answer. Shortly afterwards, however, they perceived a white-clothed figure hurrying towards them. It was Whitehead. He hastened to the door and, producing a key, opened it. Then he turned to the visitors.

“ Good day, gennlemen. You come in. I see you comf’ble.”

They all went inside. The place was small but comfortably furnished. There were only two rooms. The bigger one was the sitting-room, and it contained three large Madeira chairs of different shapes, a settee, and two small tables of bamboo. On the wall facing the door was a large framed colour-print, a portrait of the German Kaiser wearing an eagle-crested helmet. Two other colour-prints decorated the walls; they were picture posters of steamships of a German-African steamship company. There were several windows, and the interior was well ventilated and delightfully cool. On the edges of the window-frames one could see the stems and the leaves of trailing plants with which the exterior walls of the bungalow were more or less covered.

Whitehead motioned his visitors to sit down, and at once produced a large bottle of gin, a smaller one of bitters, three glasses of varying shapes and sizes, and a large china mug. The latter he placed on one side, with the remark:

"Dis one for m'self."

Tug stretched himself luxuriously on the easy chair, lit a cigarette, and sipped gin and bitters. From the wide-open windows there was wafted to them a breeze of delightful coolness laden with the scents of the garden. This was life, he thought. It was worth joining the Navy for; almost worth getting wounded for. His attitude was clearly shared by his companions.

"Join the Navy and see the world in comfort," Billing remarked.

Not very much was said for some time. All the men seemed to enjoy the peace, the quiet, and the comfort of the place. They sat and smoked for a little while in silence. From outside there came the quiet taps of the hoe on the loose soil. At frequent intervals there was added the few notes of the Sword *motif* hummed from a nigger throat. Whitehead beamed at his visitors.

"Not like de man-o'-war, eh?" he said with a very broad smile that displayed his white teeth in dazzling contrast to his black skin.

"No, not a bit," said Billing, putting down his glass.

"You tink not like de man-o'-war?" said Whitehead.

"No; not like the man-o'-war," replied Billing.

"D'ye mean *we* don't like the man-o'-war?" said Riley, who thought he detected the elements of a misunderstanding in Billing's last reply.

"You doan like de man-o'-war?" Whitehead raised his eyebrows with an air of perplexity.

"No," suddenly interrupted Porson. "'E means this 'ere shack ain't like the 'Aggie'."

"'E didn't say that," said Riley. "What 'e said was——"

"Hold 'ard a minute. Who's this?"

There came the faint sound of the tinkling of a guitar, and then approaching footsteps were heard. Someone was approaching the bungalow. Shortly afterwards a figure clad in white drill stood in the doorway. It was a nigger. He stopped playing and nodded to the company. Then he said to Whitehead:

"Bush nigger out dere. He make for starve, I tink."

Whitehead just nodded and went on smoking his pipe.

"Eh. What's that about a bush nigger?" said Riley. "Did you say 'e's starving?"

The new-comer, whose name was Bartholomew Roberts, nodded indifferently and commenced twanging his guitar.

Riley rose to his feet.

"Let's 'ave a look at this bloke," he said.

He went to the door. Porson and Tug also got up and followed him. When they got outside they saw a pitiable-looking object standing motionless and silent a few paces from the working nigger, who continued his job without taking the slightest notice of him. It was a black man clothed, if it could be called clothed, in a dirty rag that hung in shreds from his right shoulder and reached hardly lower than his waist. But it was not his rags that formed the pitiable part of his condition. The man was little better than

a skeleton. On his left side, which was uncovered, his ribs literally protruded. His legs were like jointed sticks. His countenance, not handsome at the best of times, was made repulsive by his sunken eyes and hollow cheeks. It was more hideous than a death's head. There was no doubt about it, the man was literally starved. He said no word and made no movement, but watched them with a meaningless stare. Where he had come from they had no means of finding out, for to their questions he made no sort of answer.

"Poor devil," said Riley. "'Ere." He called to Billing, who had just come out of the bungalow. "Ask old Stick-in-the-mud in there if 'e's got any gash. This 'ere Johnny's nearly done for by the look of 'im."

They managed to extract from Whitehead, who did not seem disposed to exert himself very much on behalf of his starving countryman, an enamelled tin plate containing a couple of handfuls of boiled rice. This Riley handed to the starving black, who grabbed it without a word and at once stuffed about half of the rice in his mouth. The physical effort seemed as much as he could manage. He half-fell, half-lowered himself to the ground and began a number of contortions with his jaws and throat, which indicated a laborious effort to swallow the food.

"'Ere, go easy with it, George," said Billing. "Take it a bit at a time, man."

The black made no answer. He appeared not to understand a word that was said to him. He managed to gulp down the stuff slowly, but with a convulsive

movement that was horrible to behold. Then he grabbed the remainder of the rice and, lowering his head, thrust the handful into his mouth. The onlookers observed his throat moving for a few seconds; then he collapsed and rolled on his stomach. When they turned him over he was dead.

All the while from the interior of the bungalow the tinkling sound of the guitar played by Bartholomew Roberts issued forth, while every few seconds the hoeing nigger in the garden hummed with monotonous repetition the Sword *motif* from the "Nibelung's Ring". Another nigger more or less, it mattered nothing to these blacks. When Riley entered the bungalow once more and announced that "bush nigger lib for die", the man Whitehead merely nodded his head and repeated: "Sure, lib for die."

Tug came away from the bungalow leading the baby goat by a cord. From the first he had taken a fancy to the animal, and before leaving he had quietly struck a bargain with Whitehead whereby, to his no small delight, the goat became his own. There now remained the difficulty of providing quarters for it in the cruiser when he arrived on board. Riley, the chief stoker, had informed him that this difficulty was not insurmountable and that provided he obtained the permission of the commander and that he was prepared to clean up any mess that it made it was probable that the animal would be all right there. Riley further undertook to put in a request to the commander on Tug's behalf for permission to bring the goat on board.

Riley was almost as fond of the animal as Tug was, and during the remaining two days of his leave he came often to the hospital for the express purpose of seeing it and fondling it. He gave it a name—Percy, he called it—and this name it retained for the remainder of its lifetime. Finally he begged Tug to allow him to take it back with him to the ship. Although disinclined to part with his new pet, even for a short time, Tug at last allowed himself to be persuaded, but on the distinct understanding that any arrangements that the chief stoker might make with regard to it should not in the smallest degree impair his own right of ownership.

CHAPTER XX

THE SICK BAY

Tug returned to the ship about a week afterwards. He was conveyed to the coast in a tiny railway train that slowly wended its way downward over its narrow-gauge track. Through a thick forest belt, along the slopes of steep hill-sides, over ravines, and down winding valleys, the short train took its twisted course, getting lower, always lower, until the warm, steamy atmosphere conveyed to him the fact that the mountain region had been left behind and the coast was near at hand. The train left the bush and entered a flat area planted with cocoa trees, and eventually ran out to the seashore. After running a short distance along the shore it pulled up at a siding close to a small jetty.

The passage to the *Agésilas* was made in a small coasting steamer. Tug arrived late in the evening and was immediately sent to the sick bay for examination. His condition was deemed satisfactory by the surgeon, and on the following day he was put on light duty.

Almost as soon as he arrived on board he sought out his pet goat. He found that Percy was installed as one of the ship's company. Any anxiety that he may have felt regarding the welfare of his pet was soon dispelled. The lower deck men almost in a

body had taken charge of it. Indeed, the care and attention lavished upon it was such as to take it out of Tug's hands altogether. To all intents Percy had ceased to be his property; it was the property of the ship's company. Altogether it was a little too much of a good thing from Tug's point of view. But he had to make the best of it and be content with the knowledge that his pet, of which he was extraordinarily fond, was in thoroughly good hands.

The men fed it with choice titbits from their own rations. They washed it and combed it and decked it out with a gaudy necktie made from strips of bunting. In complete freedom and comfort it strolled about the battery, the fo'c'sle, the fore and aft bridge, indeed practically everywhere about the upper part of the ship. It walked into the blacksmith's shop and stood by watching while those hefty individuals blew up their forge and smote with their hammers.

Tug found that a good many more of the men had acquired pets during his absence. There were three monkeys, one of them a large and savage brute that bit everyone that tried to touch it, a dog, a squirrel, and, most strange of all, two sloths—mother and baby—animals which almost certainly were never bred in that part of the world. There were also numerous parrots. The ship seemed to be swarming with parrots, grey African birds that were supposed to be good talkers. But none of them ever seemed to want to talk; no understandable remarks could ever be got from them. Jepson, the chief sick-berth steward, had one, a surly-looking specimen that sat all day long on a perch in the sick bay and glowered at its master.

The steward tried very patiently to teach it up-to-date phrases, but without the slightest result. Perhaps his conversational course was too ambitious, or too advanced, or else his pupil was too dull to learn. Anyhow, Gus—that was the parrot's name—never acquired a single scrap of the English language.

"Strafe the Kaiser," Jepson would say to it. "Strafe the Kaiser; strafe the Kaiser." Gus merely gave him a sour look and never even moved its beak.

"All right," Jepson would say. "You'll learn it some day and a good deal more besides."

Few of the parrots survived for more than a couple of months after being brought to the ship; not one of them lived to see the country of its adoption. A good number of them had their necks wrung by their exasperated owners, who had nothing to show for their linguistic tuition save the mark of an occasional bite. A few fell overboard and died that way. Some of them just died. The enthusiasm among the ship's company for parrot-keeping, which was at its height when Tug returned to the ship, died down almost to extinction at the end of a couple of months or so.

For nearly a week Tug carried on light duty, and then a tiny piece of steel that had remained embedded in his thigh worked its way to the surface and necessitated a small operation for its removal. So he had to go sick again, and he took up his quarters in the sick bay.

The change from the hospital quarters ashore to those of the ship proved rather a change for the worse from the point of view of his general comfort. Once more he was under the loose but none the less irksome

discipline of the Navy. The hospital, of course, had its rules to which all the patients had to conform, but there it was an easier, a kindlier restraint. He was made to feel that, for his own sake, he must be made whole in the quickest possible time. Here in the ship he was a defective spare part that was judged likely to be fit for use in the not distant future. He was taking up space in a rather over-used workshop. Accordingly he was to be hustled into fitness as quickly as possible. Not that the treatment was rough; it was only unsympathetic, and a trifle uncouth. The sick bay stewards clearly regarded him, as they regarded all the other subjects of their ministrations, whether they were cases arising out of contact with the enemy or merely contact with black women, as something in the nature of a nuisance.

There were two sick bay stewards. The chief of them, Jepson, was a heavily-built, blustering individual with an abnormally fleshy countenance, a large mouth, and a loud laugh that conveyed little mirth and still less sympathy. Jepson was rather fond of retailing to the patients the jests of the surgeon, who saw in the frequent syphilitic cases that came before him suitable subjects for his wit; but, somehow, in the hands of the steward, the stories failed to excite the mirthful faculties of his listeners.

The other steward was rather older than his chief. He was a thin-faced, cadaverous-looking person named Blacker. In the ship he was known by the name of Old Mouldy. He was the most depressing person that a sick man could possibly have about him. He never smiled, never joked, hardly ever talked, and

when he did it was to ejaculate some pessimistic observation in a mumbling monotone. His pessimism must have been constitutional. No one could have acquired such a depressing outlook through mere contact with misfortune. Times there were, indeed, when he did make what must have been a violent effort to be cheerful, but the attempt invariably resulted in such a forbidding failure that he immediately relapsed into a silence more gloomy than ever. The times when he shone most were when some patient would try to get from him some idea of the progress of his complaint. Then he would really do his best to envelop the sufferer in what he conceived to be a veil of blessed hope.

"How is it to-day, Blackie?" the man would perhaps ask.

"Well—" He would choke back what sounded like a heartbroken sob, and then, brightening wonderfully, he would say:

"About the same as yesterday."

"Oh, yes? I thought it was a bit better yesterday."

"About the same as it is now."

"D'ye think it'll be any better in a day or two?"

"About the same, I should say."

One afternoon Tug was dozing in his hammock when he felt his clews roughly handled. Looking up he beheld the square and bulbous countenance of Jepson, the chief steward, before him.

"Just heard a good one," he said. "Bettesworth, that E.R.A. bloke with the ginger hair, has just been along to see Hoppy (the surgeon's name was Hopkinson). He asked him to examine him. He

told him he'd been burned sitting on a steam pipe while mending a joint. Hoppy had a look at the affected part for a minute or two. Then he said: 'Yes, you've burnt it all right; but not on a steam pipe.' Not on a steam pipe. Haw, haw, haw."

That terrible guffaw diminished in intensity as the unsightly cavern that emitted it gradually receded from Tug's vicinity.

While Tug was a patient in the sick bay a mail arrived from England. Tug got one letter. It was from his father.

"Dear Ernie," it ran, "I got your letter and was surprised to hear they had sent you to Africa. I suppose you find it a bit hot in the stokehold out there.

"Well, I am glad you are away from the torpedoes. Another ship went down last week called the *Untamable*. I expect you have heard all about it on your ship. What a blessing you are out of it, my boy. And the trenches are worse still. Poor Skilton that I told you about was killed the week before last. George Lake, the postman, went yesterday. They are talking about making everyone go now. It may be your dad's turn next—who knows?—though I am forty-five next October. Sometimes I feel it's mean of us old 'uns to sit at home while you boys are going through it. Well, I won't grouse if they do take me, though what's to become of the business I don't know.

"I don't know whether you knew Bob Tranmer that keeps a grocer's close to your Aunt Emmie. I

hear he has had some trouble, too. His girl Elsie has been going about for some time with one of your Naval officer chaps, a dispatcher or director of transport or something of that. And now she has gone off with him for good. He won't marry her, I don't think. It's a pity. I thought she was a nice girl, a bit stuck-up, but I didn't think she would go and do a thing like that. Well, I don't suppose this will interest you very much, but Emmie says you met her at some time or other."

CHAPTER XXI

WARRIORS AT PLAY

AFTER his discharge from the sick bay Tug was put on light duty assisting the engineer's storekeeper. On the second day a new job was found for him. As a means of occupying some of their spare time the officers had formed a cricket club. A fairly flat piece of ground had been found not far from the river bank, and a large roller having been obtained, several of the hands were set to work to transform the land in question into a cricket field. The engineer-lieutenant-commander, whose name was Plunkett, was an enthusiastic cricketer, and he was quite prepared to lend the services of a few of his men for the purpose. Tug accordingly found himself appointed one of the ground staff, and he spent many days dragging a roller up and down the improvised pitch.

As a matter of fact the club had been in existence for several weeks before Tug's services were requisitioned. Indeed, one match had already been played, though not on the new ground close to the ship. About three weeks earlier the *Agesilaus* C.C. had met a team of Army officers and N.C.O.'s drawn from the detachments quartered at that time in Elala. The game had been played at that place, and the result was a disastrous beating for the sailors. Naturally

they were anxious to wipe out the stain of their defeat, and a return fixture was arranged to be played, this time on the ship's own ground.

The members of the ship's team and those who hoped to get a place in the team put in some strenuous practice every afternoon that they could be spared away from the ship.

Tug was not displeased with his job, and although he was no cricketer he displayed considerable zeal in helping to get the ground ready for the approaching match. He worked during the forenoon. After dinner all he had to do was to retrieve the balls for the practising officers. This sometimes involved a lengthy search, as the fringe of the field in more than one direction consisted of some rough undergrowth than which no better resting-place for a lost cricket ball could be found.

One afternoon while Tug was assisting the players in this manner a sub-lieutenant named O'Donnell passed him on his way to the nets. O'Donnell was keen on getting a place in the team.

Engineer-Lieutenant-Commander Plunkett was at the nets. Plunkett was without doubt the slogger of the team. He was a one-stroke man, and he had been demonstrating his one stroke pretty freely at the expense of the perspiring bowlers, and was at the moment leaning on his bat and taking a breather while the said bowlers were hunting for the lost balls in the tangled thicket at the far end of the field. Besides Tug, a number of stooping, flannel-clad forms might have been seen worming their way in and out among the bushes. Once a bent back was observed

to straighten itself and its possessor wiped his forehead with a handkerchief.

"Right-o. I've got mine," he said.

"I wish this cursed jungle wasn't here," remarked the surgeon, who was also hunting for a ball. "Half the bally time's taken up fishing for the pills."

The other emerged from the bushes.

"I say," he said to Tug, who was perfunctorily searching on the margin of the wilderness. "You stand there and watch the balls. When you see one plonk into this mess mark carefully where it drops."

Mr. Hooker, the navigating lieutenant—he it was who spoke—turned and hurried to the nets to try again his luck against the smiting engineer.

O'Donnell, who had also arrived at the nets, rolled up his sleeves. As he did so he gave the ball a few spins in his right hand. O'Donnell rather fancied himself as a break bowler. He gave his arm one or two preliminary swings and marked out his short run. Then he took a few steps up to the stump, making mysterious contortions with his body and arms. His right wrist was bent back, he doubled himself almost in two, jerked his body upright, and then slowly tossed the ball in the direction of the batsman.

Crack!

With monotonous sameness this ball went soaring exactly the way of the others.

"Lib for bush," waggishly remarked the smiter as he watched its lofty and lengthy flight.

"Heads!"

Two or three voices bawled an alarmed note of warning.

"Rotten swipe," O'Donnell muttered to himself.

The hunters in the thicket abruptly stopped their search and, without looking up, held their hands over their heads as a meagre protection against the chance impact of the approaching projectile.

Plop! It fell a yard or two from the surgeon.

"This is getting beyond the limit," he growled. "That blighter's had his ten minutes. Hello, well, I'm blowed. I've been nearly sitting on the bally thing all the time."

The surgeon stooped and picked up the ball. Then he, too, came out of the shrubbery and hastened in the direction of the nets.

"Did you notice where my ball went?" O'Donnell asked him as they passed each other.

"It's in that shrubbery somewhere," the surgeon responded, pointing backward, as if that defined the bearings of the ball with mathematical precision.

One by one the searchers in the thicket retrieved their balls and departed, till only O'Donnell and Tug were left.

"It's my opinion that blighter pinched my ball," said the officer after about ten minutes' fruitless search. At length he gave it up as a bad job. He was just going away when Tug stooped down suddenly.

"Here it is, sir."

"Good! Where was it?"

Tug handed O'Donnell an old ball with several stitches missing.

"That's not mine. I thought so. One of those

blokes went off with the first ball he spotted and didn't bother to look for this rotten old thing."

O'Donnell eventually identified his ball as that which the surgeon was using.

"Is that really yours?" the surgeon asked him when he demanded his property. "It's exactly like the one I was using. Well, you can have it," he added graciously.

Meanwhile Tug remained, where he had been told to remain, on the fringe of the bush tract. All at once he became conscious that he was very tired. Another ball came soaring in his direction; he made a move towards the spot where it fell. But his walk was unaccountably unsteady. The ground seemed to have developed undulations. It seemed to him to be swaying and heaving like a sea with a bad swell. He tottered and stopped. He thought he heard voices calling him. Suddenly one of the undulations in the ground hit him, and he remembered no more.

He recovered consciousness a few hours afterwards in the sick bay of the *Agesilaus*. He was feeling weak and a trifle giddy, but otherwise he did not feel there was very much the matter with him. To his inquiries as to how he had got there Old Mouldy replied: "Brought."

"What's the matter with me?" asked Tug.

"Nothing much," replied the steward dolefully.

"Can I get up to-morrow?"

"No, you can't."

"When can I get up?"

"Can't say. Maybe a week; maybe a couple of months."

Old Mouldy opened a drawer and from it he drew forth a thermometer. Then he took Tug's temperature. He looked at the instrument, gave a perceptible sigh, and then looked at Tug and shook his head.

"How is it, Blackie?" demanded Tug.

But the steward was not to be drawn. He had already talked far more than he considered desirable. He shook his head again and departed.

Actually it was four days afterwards that Tug, seemingly none the worse for his touch of the sun, was able to return to duty.

CHAPTER XXII

TUG IN THE STEAM CUTTER

ONE evening shortly after Tug had returned to duty he was approached by the chief stoker.

"Ever driven a steam cutter?" the chief stoker asked him.

"No," replied Tug.

"Well, you can begin now. You'll start to-morrow morning. See Pricky McKenzie when 'e comes back from 'is next trip, and 'e'll put you wise. It's simple enough. Get Morley, the cook's mate, to give you a shake at four-forty-five. The boat will be called away at six-fifteen."

The steamboat returned to the ship soon after eight o'clock. Tug met Pricky McKenzie as he climbed on to the fo'c'sle from the boom.

"I say," he said, "the chief stoker said I was taking your place in the steam cutter to-morrow."

"All right," said McKenzie, and turned to dive below.

"Wait a bit. He told me you'd put me up to it."

"Put you up to it?"

"Show me all about the job."

"Can't now, old son. I want my supper. There's nothing in it. You'll manage all right."

"Yes; but I'd like you to——"

"After supper, then. All right; come down in the boat with me after supper."

When supper was over Tug looked round for McKenzie, but he was not in his mess. After a long search he found him on the fore shelter-deck. He was playing cards with a marine and two seamen.

Tug touched him on the shoulder. McKenzie looked up for about half a second, and then continued his scrutiny of the cards in his hand.

"All right, Towney," he said after a few moments. "I'll be down in a minute. I'll just finish this 'and."

After that hand McKenzie played a couple more. Tug waited more or less patiently. After some time a stoker sauntered on to the deck space. Catching sight of McKenzie, he called out to him:

"I say, Pricky, the crusher's looking for you. 'E's got a bar on about some gear o' yourn left skulling in the bag flat. I'd look 'im up if I was you. 'E's not 'alf dizzy."

McKenzie threw down his cards with an oath. He got up and sped down the ladder. Tug did not see any more of him until pipe down, when he caught him as he was lugging his hammock from the nettings.

"I say, Towney. What about that steam cutter?" he said.

"Oh, 'ell! Look 'ere. I'll get up with you in the morning, and we'll get down in the boat together an' get 'er lit up an' started. 'Ow will that do?"

Tug did not think it would do at all. He knew his man by now; and, moreover, he knew a good deal about these overnight promises about getting up early in the morning. So he said:

"I'd rather you showed me now, if you don't mind."

"It ain't no good goin' down in the boat now," replied McKenzie. "What's the good? You can't see nothing now. After all, what d'ye want me to tell yer. There's nothing in it. You know as much about it as I did when I took 'er over. All you got to do is——"

Here followed a briefly-worded catalogue of items that Tug must on no account forget:

"Open yer drains.

"Don't forget to start yer feed pump.

"Jest warm 'er through."

Don't forget this, and that, and a few more things. And so on, and so on.

With this perfunctory form of instruction it looked as if Tug perforce had to be content. Fortunately he had been in the steam-cutter once or twice before, and on more than one occasion he had taken some notice of the operations of the stoker in charge, with a view to finding out a little about it in case he should be called upon at short notice to take his place.

On the following morning, at a quarter to five, he was duly roused up by the cook's mate, another man whose job required an early start, and whose good offices he had secured beforehand. When he got on deck it was pitch dark, the deck was sopping wet, and a faint drizzle was falling, the wind-up of what he discovered afterwards had been a tremendous down-pour. Warily, for in the darkness it was no joke, he climbed down on to the slippery boom and made his way along it till he reached the Jacob's ladder.

The steamboat was some distance away from the end of the boom, and straining hard at the mooring-rope, owing to the force of the current. He lowered himself down on to the ladder, and, holding on by one hand, he grasped the painter. It was as stiff as a wire rope. He had to use every ounce of his strength to pull the heavy boat up sufficiently near for him to get on board. Very slowly and reluctantly she came up, immediately dropping back with the current whenever he relaxed his straining pull for a second or two of needed rest. At last he got her bows underneath him, and contrived to drop himself on to the tiny fo'c'sle before the current carried the boat back once more.

He found several inches of water in the well, and each time the boat rolled ever so slightly the water came up over the level of the fire-grate. By the light of a hand-lamp he set about the dismal duty of baling it out. It was a long and tedious job, but eventually he got the water down sufficiently to permit of lighting the fire. After this fortune was less unkind to him. With the help of some oily waste he got the fire alight, and before very long he noted with satisfaction that the pointer of the steam pressure-gauge began to move slowly. He got the engine warmed through—McKenzie had left the engine in a fair state of running order; he could scarcely do less—and by the time the quartermaster on board the ship had roared the order "Away steam-cutter," he felt fairly confident that he had everything ready to start.

It was now broad daylight. The coxswain and bowman had been on board some time, cleaning their

part of the boat. The coxswain gave the order "Full ahead". Tug moved the regulator, and to his no small surprise, it must be said, the engine began to move.

After that it was all plain sailing, or rather steaming. Having got over the preliminary difficulties, Tug was too watchful and cautious to be caught napping whenever his duty called upon him at short notice to perform any required service. Although his working day was a long one, the duty was not very hard, and he had many periods of leisure. By the time he had spent a couple of days in the boat he felt perfectly comfortable and confident with regard to his job.

A little more than a week he spent on this service, and then an incident occurred that not only ended his connection with the steamboat, but nearly brought to an end his naval career.

While Tug was in hospital two officers had come out from England to join the ship. Both of them belonged to the Royal Naval Reserve. The officers of this branch, by the way, were often referred to by their brethren of the regular Navy as "The Hungry Hundred", a reproach which, if it was meant to indicate an acquisitive tendency on the part of the officers in question, came rather ill from many of those who made it.

One of the new-comers to the ship was a dark-featured and muscular person named Congreve. There were rumours throughout the lower-deck that he had "tons of brass", that he was connected with a wealthy family of shipowners, and last, but not least, that he

could drink all the officers of the ship under the table.

Mr. Congreve had not been long in the *Agésilas* before he made his presence felt, among the seamen at all events. He had a strong and forceful personality. He could get work done. He had another notable characteristic, a complete command of lower-deck profanity, which he did not hesitate to exercise on every possible occasion. He was no respecter of persons, and did not dream of moderating his language whosoever might be present or within ear-shot. Once, but only once, the ship's chaplain ventured to remonstrate mildly with him on his excessive use of bad language. Lieutenant Congreve did not encourage advice or criticism in regard to his conduct, at any rate from people who were not his superiors in official rank, and the well-meaning padre retired somewhat abashed from a short interview, in the course of which the lieutenant recommended him to mind his something, something business, and get on with his Psalm-smiting and Bible-punching.

With the men he was not altogether unpopular, although he was exacting to the limit, and inclined to work them harder than was usual in a ship of war. He was a competent seaman—that, of course, goes a long way with the men; they cannot stand a duffer at any price—and his proficiency in the use of their blood-and-refuse-besprinkled vernacular made him in a sense a brother, a relationship which he improved at times with a jest of the kind they specially appreciated.

One afternoon Lieutenant Congreve and Sub-

Lieutenant O'Donnell were amusing themselves on the quarter-deck shooting at sea-birds, of which a large number came into the river, attracted by the refuse that was thrown overboard from the ships.

The sport was very poor indeed. After a few shots the sea-birds gave the ship a very wide berth. Congreve, standing on the quarter-deck with loaded rifle, gazed impatiently at the reluctant birds, which screamed at him, so it seemed, with mockery. One or two shots he let off at them in his exasperation. But the distance was too great. Not one of them was hit. They seemed to know they were in no danger. Those who were resting on the water did not rise, and most of them did not even trouble to turn their heads.

Congreve bit his lower lip, and turned to O'Donnell. A nigger canoe passed slowly at a distance of about a cable's length.

"Damme, I've a good mind to try a pot-shot at that nigger," he said.

"Well, carry on," replied O'Donnell. "Pot him by all means. I shan't mind."

Congreve raised his rifle, and looked along the barrel. Then he lowered it again with seeming reluctance.

"No," he said, after a pause. "I'm a sportsman, and potting niggers isn't sport. Not that I care a damn about his stinking carcase. But it isn't done."

"Wait a bit; here we are," he exclaimed suddenly. A sea-bird was flying rapidly towards them. Congreve raised his rifle again. He eyed the approaching bird with a steady gaze. His finger was on the trigger. He held his breath. Suddenly the bird swerved,

swung round in a wide semi-circle, and receded as rapidly as it had come.

“Blast it!”

“Hard luck again,” said O'Donnell.

Congreve turned round with an expression of intense annoyance. His eye ranged along the port side of the battery. The second-cutter was up at the davits. Poking above the gunwale of the boat was a tiny head, surmounted by two tiny horns. Congreve saw the head; O'Donnell saw it at the same moment.

“Here we have the mountain goat,” said O'Donnell. “Jumps about from precipice to precipice and back again to . . .”

“Crack!”

The goat sprang up on the gunwale of the boat, tottered for a fraction of a second, gave a poor imitation of a bleat, and then tumbled into the sea.

“Now you've done it,” said O'Donnell. “That's the men's pet goat, and they'd rather lose a week's allowance of grog than lose that.”

That afternoon, when the steam-cutter returned from one of her routine trips, the bowman had no sooner tied her up to the boom than it was piped away again. As the boat was leaving, a stoker on the fo'c'sle hailed Tug. Tug listened, but failed to get the sense of what was shouted at him. All he heard was:

“Percy . . . Brass-mounted swine.”

Evidently it was something about Percy, his goat, and an officer. What had the animal been doing? He was a trifle anxious. Despite the virtual adoption of the animal by the ship's company, he had grown

enormously fond of it. He hoped they would not make him send it ashore; he felt he would put up with anything rather than that.

The boat went alongside the accommodation-ladder. Two officers descended into it. The boat waited for a third to come down. The two officers in the boat were Lieutenant Congreve and Sub-Lieutenant O'Donnell. They were waiting for the staff paymaster. The intricate accounts controlled by Mr. Bouckley always seemed to prevent that officer from being punctual at any appointment or function.

"Hard luck about the goat," said O'Donnell, as he sat down. "Who was the actual owner of it?"

"Blest if I know," replied Congreve.

"I don't fancy the hands will be mighty pleased at it's untimely end," said O'Donnell. "They rather took to the beast."

"They'll get over it. There's a lot too much bally livestock in the ship. That'll make one animal the less, anyway. It was a damned good shot of mine, don't you think?"

"Nothing wrong with the shot. Only if you carry on clearing out the men's livestock in that fashion I fancy the skipper'll have something to say."

"I wouldn't mind trying a shot or two at the parrots. We could spare a few." He looked upwards impatiently. "Where's the man got to?"

Tug, who had overheard the whole of this short conversation, sat quiet and still in the boat, with his head bent down almost to his knees. He found himself trembling violently with an emotion combined of grief and hatred. For a few moments grief was

uppermost. He felt the loss of his beloved pet, so wantonly slain by the officer, as he would have felt the loss of a near relative. But this feeling after a time gave way to a sentiment of ungovernable hate directed against Congreve.

So engrossed was Tug in his miserable reflections that he did not hear the order to start the engine. It had to be repeated three times, each succeeding time in louder and more insistent tones, before he pulled himself together sufficiently to realize where he was. After the third time Congreve added an admonition :

“Stop wool-gathering there, and wake your bloody self up.”

Tug shot the officer a malevolent glance, and started the engine. On arriving at the port lower down the river the three officers climbed out of the boat, and the coxswain was directed to wait at the landing-stage. Tug crouched before the small boiler absorbed in his moody meditations. The coxswain and the bowman climbed into the small fore-peak to get out of the grilling rays of the sun. Tug was unconscious of the heat and the glare, unconscious of everything but his loss.

After some time—it may have been ten minutes, or it may have been an hour; Tug had no sense of time just then—he became aware of a slight and momentary rocking of the boat. Lieutenant Congreve had just returned, and had just stepped on board. He had returned by himself, and was carrying some newspapers under his arm. He gave no order, and made no remark, but sat down in the stern-sheets, and opened one of the newspapers. Clearly he intended

to wait until one or other of his companions returned. The coxswain and bowman were still in the fore-peak; probably they were asleep. To all intents and purposes Tug was alone in the boat with his enemy.

In the bottom of the boat, beside the boiler, were a couple of spare fire-bars. Almost unconsciously his hand closed on the end of one of them, and he lifted it slightly. It was a heavy wrought-iron bar, and would make a formidable weapon in the hands of a determined man. He gripped it forcibly, and in a flash his mind was made up. Tug, who had never in his life desired to injure even a thieving dog, was now filled with the most murderous intentions towards the reclining figure in the stern.

Slowly he turned his head towards the stern to see if the officer was looking at him. He was going to take no chances. He cared nothing now for any consequences. But if he was going to be made to suffer afterwards, at any rate, he told himself, he was going to make sure of that bloody swine in the stern-sheets. He turned round and, crouching on one knee with his back bent down, he gazed aft at his unconscious enemy. Congreve was not looking at him. Totally unaware of his peril, he was sitting negligently reading an English newspaper. His legs were crossed, and one hand, which he had just released from the paper, was dangling idly over the side of the boat.

Dragging his fire-bar behind him, Tug quietly and cautiously crept round the engine, and reached the small partition that formed the only obstacle separating him from his prey. The officer was still

immersed in his newspaper; he had not seen him. Placing his hands, one of them still gripping the fire-bar, on to the ledge of the partition, Tug prepared for a spring. He wanted to get at his man before the latter realized his intention, and took steps to frustrate his purpose. He paused for a second, and set his teeth for the assault. The officer read on; it was now or never.

“Congreve!”

The word came like a thunderbolt. The voice came from above. Tug stopped dead in his tracks, still poised on tiptoe for the spring, and every nerve taut. He glanced upward at the same moment that Congreve laid aside his newspaper with a yawn. An officer was standing at the top of the jetty looking downward. It was Mr. Bouckley come back for a passage to the ship. More by a lucky impulse than from actual presence of mind Tug let go the fire-bar that was suspended from his right hand. It fell almost noiselessly to the bottom of the boat. He grabbed a piece of cotton-waste from his belt, and commenced a perfunctory polishing of the ledge of the partition.

Congreve had not noticed Tug. He nodded to Bouckley.

“Any luck with the skipper?” he asked.

Bouckley did not reply. He was not looking now at Congreve. He was looking at Tug, and there was unmistakable suspicion in his glance.

“Where’s the coxswain?” he said at last.

“In the fore-peak, I think,” replied Tug. He was trembling considerably. He had completely recovered

his sanity, and the realization of what he had nearly done filled him with horror. His hatred of Congreve was momentarily forgotten.

"Rouse him out at once," said Bouckley, as he descended into the boat. "We don't want to hang about here all day."

Tug went for'ard to the fore-peak, and woke up the two men.

During the return to the ship, and for the remainder of the day, Tug felt dazed. He was barely conscious of the people around him, and he rarely paid any attention to any remark or order addressed to him until it had been shouted at him at least a second time. His appearance of general misfortune did not pass without comment from his mess-mates.

"'Ullo," said Tiddley Roe, on first beholding him at supper-time. "What's up with you? You look as if someone'd pinched yer tot an' only offered yer a 'undred quid in compensation."

Tug did not reply.

"Yer uncle ain't died and left yer 'is mansion, 'as 'e?"

"No, 'e hasn't."

"Cheer up, Towney. The War won't last more'n another ten years."

The well-meant efforts of Tiddley Roe failed completely to arouse the conversational powers, such as they were, of Tug.

"You'll be a cheerful old bleeder when you're ninety," his mess-mate concluded, and thenceforth gave him up as a bad job.

Once during the evening, while he was standing

moodily on the fo'c'sle of the ship, he was addressed by the steward, Fenley. He had not spoken to him since the little tiff that resulted from the story of the blackmailing adventure, and Tug was a little bit surprised that the steward should have anything to communicate to him.

"I say," said Fenley almost in a whisper as he came close up to Tug. "Mr. Bouckley's got it in for you. What 'appened in the steam-bus this afternoon? I heard 'im talking to one of your engineers in the ward-room. He said something about you acting a bit funny. What went wrong?"

"Oh, nothing that I know of," replied Tug. He was not very interested, and didn't care very much whether Mr. Bouckley had it in for him or not. He didn't want to talk to Fenley, who was about the last person that he would have thought of taking into his confidence. So he gave that inquisitive person nothing whatever to satisfy his curiosity.

On the following day Tug was ordered by the chief stoker to leave the steam-cutter and report for duty in the stokehold. After he had finished work for the day he was bathing in the wash-place when the chief stoker put his head in the doorway.

"Go along to the engineer's office when you've 'ad tea. Be there at five o'clock sharp."

Tug wondered for a minute or two what could be the meaning of this summons. But he did not concern himself very much about it, and beyond making a mental note of the time of the appointment, he allowed it to slide from his memory.

While he was at tea he heard Murray, his

successor in the steamboat, holding forth to a messmate about the rights and wrongs of his new appointment.

"The chief dustman told me I was to keep out of the sun as much as possible. 'Ow the 'ell can yer keep out of the sun in that old tub? P'raps 'e'll 'ave an awning rigged."

Punctually at five Tug made his way to the office. Inside the doorway he could see the chief stoker talking to the senior engineer, Mr. Lefebvre. After he had been there a few minutes, the engineer came out.

"Oh, you're Wilson." Mr. Lefebvre looked at Tug's face narrowly. Then he said:

"Are you feeling quite all right?"

"Yes, sir," said Tug, wondering at this extraordinary question from the engineer.

"Quite well, eh? Sure you've quite got over the effects of your wounds?"

"Yes, sir. Sure."

"Just so. The surgeon reported you fit." The engineer came close to Tug, and looked at the scar on his close-cropped temple.

"You caught one there, I see. A nasty tap, eh? It looks to be healed all right. Sure you don't feel any— No headaches, or anything like that?"

"No, sir. I'm quite all right."

"Well. Now you want to take care of yourself. Don't forget you're in a funny climate. Be careful of the sun. You've been running the steam-cutter?"

"Yes, sir."

"It's a bit exposed to the sun. I've ordered you to be taken out of it. If you feel at all unwell about

the head at any time, any headaches or dizziness, or anything like that, go to the sick-bay about it as soon as you can. That's all."

Tug took himself off, a prey to rather serious and disturbed reflections. So that was why he had been taken out of the steam-cutter. That officer Bouckley had clearly observed something wrong about his behaviour in the boat, if he had not fathomed his dreadful purpose. Without doubt he had had a narrow escape from getting into very serious trouble.

One morning, about a fortnight after he had left the steam-cutter, Tug was taking his turn as mess-cook, when he observed his opposite number, Tiddley Roe, engaged in an animated conversation with a stoker named Fyson in an adjoining mess.

"It's nine months at least," Fyson was saying.

"Eighteen. And 'e'll dip 'is rating."

"Serve him right. I bet there's others besides Fenley could spin a tale about Bayliss," said Fyson, looking at Tug.

"Why; what's Bayliss done?" inquired Tug.

"Oh, nothing. Only bin shakin' 'is forefinger at Fenley."

"Is that all? Well, what's the trouble?"

"'E's down for a court-martial. That's what's the trouble with 'im. And that other pal o' yours, Fenley, looks like copping out, too."

"Bayliss is no pal of mine, and neither is Fenley," said Tug.

"No?" The rejoinder sounded a trifle sarcastic, but Tug took no notice of it.

Just before noon a mysterious inquiry was held

before the captain on the quarter-deck, at which it was noticed that Bayliss and Fenley were present. It was a hushed-up affair, and as the result of it Petty Officer Bayliss was sent ashore under a marine guard. Nothing more was seen of the steward Fenley. It was afterwards variously whispered that he had been transferred to the gunboat *Perker*, that he had been sent back to England for discharge from the Navy, and that he was ashore under surveillance. Tug never heard the whole facts concerning the matter, and before long he found himself engaged on a job that gave him something else to think about.

CHAPTER XXIII

PRIZE CREW

ONE morning Tug received an order from the chief stoker to hold himself in readiness to join a working-party away from the ship after dinner. Before long he found out that eight other stokers had also received this order. All these men soon put their heads together to ask each other what it all meant, to canvass likelihoods, to exchange rumours, and so on, as is always the case with those in regard to whom some event of unknown import is impending. Someone had heard the words "Franz Bauermann", and "prize crew" spoken by one of the upper-deck officers, and the words at once conjured up visions of interesting possibilities. The subject soon became a matter of considerable interest among others, apart from the little squad immediately concerned, and before long the rumour got about the ship that Tug and his companions were ear-marked for home. They became objects of not a little envy on the part of many of their shipmates, for by now the vast majority of the crew were tired of the service on which they were employed; and in any case a sailor on a foreign station is almost always ready to jump at a change, particularly when that change involves a journey home to England. One or two schemers spent much time thinking hard how they might contrive to insinuate

themselves into the places of the lucky nine, and the idea of bribing the chief stoker found serious consideration with more than one of them.

Inquiries among the upper-deck hands failed to add anything to that which was already known, and when it appeared that no seamen had been told to hold themselves likewise in readiness, the interest in the business rather slumped. Even stokers had to admit that it was hardly possible to work a steamer home to England without the services of a number of seamen.

The order to hold themselves in readiness to leave the ship after dinner was taken in rather a wide sense by the members of the working-party. In fact they held themselves in readiness the whole of the forenoon. After breakfast, instead of going down into the stokehold, they employed themselves tidying up their belongings, and doing odd jobs for themselves on the mess-deck, or simply doing nothing at all. Tug and a few others, including one or two watch-keepers off watch, were lounging about the mess-deck at about ten o'clock, when a stoker named Ginnell came down from the upper-deck in a great hurry. He was bursting with information.

"Say. They've finished with Bayliss," he said. "'E got nine months."

"Nine months?" said another. "That's settled 'is 'ash, I guess; and serve 'im bleed'n well right."

"'E was never much good, anyway," said Ginnell. "'E won't be missed. 'Ow to get on in the Service." Ginnell began to sing.

"If you wants a tanner a day,
'Ow d'ye do?
If you wants a tanner a day,
'Ow d'ye do?
If you wants a tanner a day,
Go to the Chief G.I. and say,
'Ere's me ——"

"What are you people doin' 'ere?"

It was the chief stoker who interrupted the song. Unnoticed, he had put in a sudden appearance in the doorway.

"Frans Boreman party," half a dozen voices at once replied in chorus.

"Oh, Frans Boreman party, is it? Well, you don't spend 'alf the forenoon loafin' about 'ere. You turn to in the stoke'ole till you're wanted. D'y'ear? That's 'ard luck, that is."

Following promptly on the finish of the dinner-hour, Tug and his associates received an order to assemble at once on the upper-deck, and proceed to the *Franz Bauermann*.

"The motor-boat's alongside now, an'll be leavin' in five minutes," said the chief stoker. "So put a jerk into it."

It was the *Franz Bauermann* then. That part of the rumour had proved to be correct. But a working-party did not sound much like a prize-crew for punching her home. The men were soon in the motor-boat, which was a large and noisy contraption, nigger-manned, and acquired none knew how. She had been in use for all kinds of purposes all the time the ship had been at her present anchorage. Aboard the *Agésilas* she was known as the "Silent Navy",

on account of the vast amount of noise and splutter she kicked up in the course of her peregrinations. The fact that her captain and crew were all niggers had doubtless been to a large extent the imaginary source of many of the weird tales that were current about her. It was said that on one occasion her bowman hitched her painter to the wooden ladder of a jetty not far from the ship, at the same time that her engineer had reversed the engine to stop her way; that afterwards the engineer had failed to stop the engine when required, with the result that the aforesaid ladder and part of the jetty were dragged into mid-stream. It was said that she had holed a French gunboat; also that she had literally put a party of Kroomen ashore on an occasion when her bows had invaded the front garden of a trader's bungalow. And Heaven knows how many native canoes she had sunk while doing her top speed of six and a quarter knots. This, however, is all by the way.

Once the party of stokers were aboard her she cast off and chugged *fortissimo* down the river to where, some three-quarters of a mile away, the rusty outlines of the *Franz Bauermann* stood out stark in the brilliant atmosphere.

The *Franz Bauermann* had been in her palmy peace-time days a branch boat of the Bauermann Line. The outbreak of War had found her pursuing her peaceful avocation on the African coast. Prompt warning of the swoop of a British cruiser had reached her in time to enable her to scurry into the river. Afterwards, finding the outlet to the sea blocked, and her abandonment unavoidable, she was scuttled in the

fairway in the hope that even her unhappy end might be made useful to the Fatherland by blocking up the river, and thus helping to defend the colony. These hopes were not realized. Not only did the British sea forces pass practically unimpeded up and down the river, but the unlucky *Franz Bauermann* herself was, by dint of persevering efforts, raised from her slimy bed, and towed to an anchorage near by. There she rode, a rusty image of her former spruce self, but otherwise not substantially damaged. It was primarily to clear some of the rust out of her boilers and otherwise set them in working order, that the select party of stokers from the *Agesilaus* had been sent aboard of her.

Down in her stokehold Tug was given a wire scrubber, and directed to get through an open man-hole into the cavernous interior of the starboard boiler. An electric-lamp on the end of a lead gave him sufficient light, and forthwith he set to work to scrub away the rust that had become plentifully caked on the sides of the barrel, the tubes, the fire-boxes, and the furnace exteriors. The monotony of the job was varied in a slight degree by the queer contortions he was forced to make in order to get past some of the intervening rows of tubes. At eight bells a petty officer, who had been directing operations, poked his head in the manhole, and said:

“All right, my son; you can pack up now, and heave yer carcase out of it.”

Tug was not sorry to comply. His eyes, his nostrils, and his throat were lined with boiler rust, and when he appeared in the comparatively well-lit

boiler-room, he had somewhat the appearance of a Red Indian. He got a wash of a sort from a large tub of water that had been placed on the fore well-deck, under the break of the fo'c'sle. After the wash the working-party were taken back to the *Agesilaus* by the "Silent Navy".

Throughout the next four days the *Franz Bauermann* party continued their operations. Twice each day they made the journey, returning to the cruiser finally for the day at tea-time. By the end of the fourth day the stokehold was made workably clean. The engine-room, during the same time, had been the subject of more specialized care. The engine-room department of the ship was pronounced to be in workable condition.

On the fifth day the members of the working-party received orders of a more particular kind, although even then the powers that be appeared to be rather cautious lest they should overstate the position regarding these nine stokers and the future that was in store for them. They were told to get together their bags and hammocks for conveyance to the *Franz Bauermann*, and be ready to proceed with them at nine o'clock that evening. It soon transpired that a number of seamen ratings had also received a similar order. The authorities might maintain a close reserve regarding what was afoot; but to the recipients of the order it could mean but one thing. Loud was their jubilation in consequence. What was the nature of the work involved troubled them not in the least; at the other end of it was *Home*.

One of the nine suddenly went sick with malaria.

His place was taken at the last moment by Shiner Wright, who lost not a moment of time in getting together his belongings. Shiner, it must be stated, was not one of those who had given any sign of envy at the luck of the prize-crew. He had, on the contrary, preserved a notable silence throughout the whole business. Nevertheless, it was remembered that on numerous occasions in the past he had expressed the most unqualified disapprobation of the ship, the station, the climate, the officers, and everything in connection with the whole commission. Accordingly the unmistakable satisfaction that his ugly countenance manifested on the present occasion did not cause any surprise to the rest of his shipmates. Whispers, indeed, were not wanting to the effect that his inclusion in the prize crew was not wholly a matter of chance, and the fact that the chief stoker had somehow become possessed of a small elephant's tusk that bore a striking resemblance to one that had formerly been in Shiner's possession, was made the subject of much unfavourable and, it is to be hoped, unjustifiable comment.

The prize crew mustered on the upper-deck of the cruiser ready for their transfer to the prize by the "Silent Navy". And then a notable catastrophe occurred. The boat was not alongside, although it was, in fact, a little overdue. The waiting stokers and seamen began to grow a trifle fidgety. They felt, somewhat unreasonably, that any delay now was likely to jeopardize their trip home. All at once an excited shout came from the port side further aft. It was not a hail; it was an exclamation of surprised

alarm. One or two loungers on the upper-deck made their way hurriedly to the port side. Others quickly followed, until quite a large number of the ship's complement were assembled there gazing through the darkness towards the landing-stage at the shore.

Tug heard a few titters; and then a mighty guffaw went up. He pushed his way to the front, and looked over the side. The "Silent Navy" had burst into flames, and was burning furiously.

"There goes England's last 'ope," someone beside him exclaimed.

"What abaht the prize crew nah?" jeered the voice of a Cockney, which betrayed a faint tinge of malice directed towards those whom he esteemed more fortunate than himself.

A chief engine-room artificer who, for some reason or other, had taken a violent hatred to the motor-boat, and particularly to Tom Taylor, its black skipper, was unrestrained in his noisy jubilation.

"There's a bloody good hand for you," he shouted. "Set fire to her, and done her in, by God. Now perhaps they'll shove him in charge of the *Foulla*. I thought that'd be the end of it. Either that or he'd blow her up." And the chief E.R.A. rubbed his hands together, and exhibited a most unamiable delight.

There was no doubt about it; the motor-boat was well alight. A big flare was to be seen rising from her stern, and one or two black figures were making frantic motions, obviously with the object of extinguishing the flames. But their efforts were entirely fruitless. The cheerful blaze extended for'ard until

at length a sudden and exceptionally good flare-up near the centre of the boat compelled the crew to make a hurried debarkation. A loud cheer from the deck of the *Agesilaus* greeted the black figures as they speedily hoisted themselves over the gunwale.

Gradually the flames died down as the fire burned itself out, and finally nothing was to be seen but what appeared to be a few sparks glowing in the darkness. The men by twos and threes drew away from the ship's side, and the members of the prize crew began to ask themselves and each other, "What about it?" Their anxiety was soon allayed. The first cutter was piped away, and in it they were ordered to take their places. They were towed to the *Franz Bauermann* by the steam cutter, and later in the evening they took up their quarters on board.

Three days later, in the forenoon, the anchor was weighed, and the rusty engines began their groaning and screeching movement, the screw churned the muddy waters, and the resuscitated steamer began her long and hazardous voyage to England. In the stokehold Tug and his partner fairly sweated in their enthusiasm to give her a good shove off.

The voyage proved not an easy one for the stokers. Two boilers were under steam, and, with all the power they could give, the ship could only make a hard seven knots. The furnaces seemed to eat up all the coal that was given them with inadequate results. All the time the unfortunate firemen boiled with the heat, and the termination of a watch found them more or less fagged out. Before many watches had passed they one and all had lost their enthusiasm for the

voyage, and they began to wish themselves back in the much-maligned "*Aggie*". As the ship gradually drew out of tropical waters the conditions became slightly easier. The work was just as heavy, but the somewhat cooler temperature made it rather less exhausting.

The *Franz Bauermann* made her voyage alone. Her gait was too slow, her progress too uncertain, for her to risk the safety of an entire convoy by being included in their company. Such risks as she undertook had to be taken solely by herself. As she gradually crept into more northern seas a course was set wide of the approaches to the European mainland. By this means it was hoped that, until she picked up soundings in home waters, she would be beyond the reach of all but the largest enemy submarines.

It was nearly six weeks after leaving her anchorage that a wireless message was picked up directing her commander to take her to a point some distance off the west coast of Ireland. There a fast "P" Class patrol-steamer was to meet her, and escort her to the mouth of the River Clyde. Following on this message there was held a consultation between the lieutenant in command and the warrant engineer. The result of a long talk was that the stokers were half-cajoled, half-driven to a further expenditure of muscular energy. The effect was a very few extra revolutions of the straining and reluctant engines, and a corresponding slight increase in the speed of the ship. Onward therefore to the hoped-for point of safety the *Franz Bauermann* pounded at a reckless gait of a little over seven knots.

All this time a most careful watch was kept on the surrounding sea for submarines, although for most of the time the brave westerlies kicked up a sufficient sea to make both the detection of a periscope and the accurate aim of a torpedo an equally difficult matter. Needless to say no lights were permitted on the upper-deck at night-time, but, as a concession, the hands were permitted to smoke in the covered portion of the main-deck, the dead-lights being shut as a matter of course.

One windy night about this time Tug went on the upper-deck after supper for a breather. The deck was not a very comfortable place that night. The darkness was intense. The *Franz Bauermann* had been built for cargo as well as passengers. Now, with empty holds and nearly empty bunkers, she rolled and plunged in that moderate sea enormously. As Tug stood near the foot of the ladder, holding on to a stanchion for support against the excessive rolling of the ship, his thoughts went back to his home. All being well, they would reach harbour in about four or five days. All being well. There was a possibility, however, that all would not be well. They were in the danger zone now, and this large vessel, lumbering along at her uneasy seven knots, unattended so far, stood a rather poor chance should a hostile submarine appear at practicable range. All was well up to now, but adverse chances were increasing hourly.

As Tug meditated, the brisk moist wind from the Western Ocean blew back his hair and moistened his lips with a salty-tasting spray. The ship plunged

through and over the invisible furrows. No moon or stars shone overhead. The darkness was complete. The world about him appeared as a black nothingness, through which the splashing of the waves forced its way to his senses. Strange it was to conceive that in that windy blackness out there might lurk one of those sinister craft. There was for this ship's company nothing to worry about at the moment. The darkness, ugly as it appeared, was in truth their greatest friend. U-boats might pass them only a few cable's lengths away; what need they care? These craft could hardly harm them now. And in five days at most they would be safe in harbour—if all went well. A very few days after that he would be home, for doubtless they would give him a few days' leave. The thoughts of home and the soft living by which it would be attended were pleasing indeed.

An extra strong and cold gust made Tug shiver, and brought home to him the fact that he was fresh from the tropics. These cold northern nights and blustering Western Ocean winds could make their presence sharply felt by men whose blood was thin.

He turned inboard, passed behind the temporary screen erected to blanket the light from the doorway, and entered the midship part of the covered main-deck. Three of the crew off watch were sitting on the deck playing cards. Tug lit a short clay pipe and stood for a while leaning against a bulkhead watching the players. Not for long, however. He had the middle watch to keep, and he hoped to get a couple of hours of sleep before being called. So,

after a few puffs, he put out his pipe, and turned away to get his hammock. The middle watch to keep; four hours of exhausting labour, commencing at midnight. Never mind, in a week or a little more he would be home. No middle watches then. If all went well.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MYSTERIOUS TRAMP

It was some time in the late forenoon on the following day that Tug became aware that there was a feeling of general uneasiness abroad. To a few others in the ship there had come somewhat earlier the sense that all was not quite well. For the past three hours sundry eyes had gazed without cessation towards the horizon on the port quarter. A telescope on the bridge had been pointed almost continuously in that direction. Something that the beholders did not altogether like was evidently looming up over there.

At sunrise the customary sweep of the horizon and the intervening seas with the glass had revealed nothing except the grey waste of waters. A little later on, as the sun rose higher and the atmosphere grew clearer, a close inspection of the skyline had shown that the *Franz Bauermann* was not the only occupant of the visible ocean. Far away on the port quarter, and almost hull down, was a steamer of some sort. This, it need hardly be said, gave no cause for alarm. Steamers were plentiful enough, and although the *Franz Bauermann* was totally unarmed, it was not above-water craft that her crew feared. It was some three hours later, at about nine o'clock, that the comparative indifference of the watchers on the bridge towards the unknown vessel had given place

to a marked curiosity. In the meantime the vessel had come very much nearer, and on closer inspection had exhibited the lines of a tramp steamer. She was travelling in a direction roughly parallel to that of the *Franz Bauermann*, and was progressing at a speed considerably greater than that which one usually associates with a tramp. The people on the bridge calculated that she would pass them, if she continued on her present course, at a distance of about three miles to port. By eleven-thirty the stranger had reached a point directly on their port beam, and it was then naturally supposed that she would pass them. But it soon became clear that this was not the stranger's intention. Having reached a position directly abreast of the *Franz Bauermann*, her engines evidently slowed down, for she continued in this position, and kept them company about three miles distant, a proceeding that gave rise to no little surprise and speculation on the part of the watchers on the *Franz Bauermann*.

Needless to say every detail of the strange vessel had been subjected to the closest scrutiny, but the glass had revealed nothing more than the first glance with the naked eye. She was painted black, and had exactly the appearance of an ocean-going tramp of about five or six thousand tons measurement. No guns, no armament of any sort could be seen. No signals of any kind came from her, and there appeared to be no means of determining her nationality, her destination, or her immediate intentions.

By the time dinner was over everybody in the ship had developed a consuming interest in the stranger.

Every man, the moment he had finished a hasty meal, hurried on deck to take a peep at her. She was still there, at the same distance away, and in the same relative position. It was about two-thirty in the afternoon that the commander of the *Franz Bauermann* determined to get some idea of the stranger's intentions by putting into operation a manœuvre that he had been considering for some time. He gave instructions to the quartermaster, and the wheel was put over to port. Gradually the *Franz Bauermann* turned her nose to starboard away from the stranger, and the distance between them began to widen. All eyes were kept on the other vessel to watch the effect on her of this move. It was not long before the answer came. A faint cloud of slightly blacker smoke issued from her funnel, and it was observed that she had also changed her direction to that which the *Franz Bauermann* was following, and that her speed had been somewhat increased to enable her to keep her position right abeam. It was clear that she did not intend to give the *Franz Bauermann* the go-by. The excitement aboard the latter vessel was now very considerable. The mysterious movements of the black tramp were beginning to assume a rather sinister import.

The commander of the *Franz Bauermann* was fully alive to the dangerous emergency that had arisen. His ship was still a good way from waters where he could count on a reasonable margin of safety. According to observations taken at noon he calculated that he would not reach the spot where he was likely to encounter his escort much before midnight. He had intended,

when darkness had overtaken them, to stop the engines and lay to until sunrise. The mysterious movements of the stranger had rather upset the apple-cart. A new situation had arisen that demanded instant action.

His resolution was soon taken. He sent for the wireless operator, and gave him a written order. The man saluted, and went down the ladder to the wireless cabin. Soon afterwards the message was sent forth into the ether to all whom it might concern that *H.M.S. Franz Bauermann* was threatened, and needed armed assistance.

A reply of a sort came with astonishing rapidity. A raised skylight on the upper-deck of the tramp suddenly collapsed and disappeared. There was a flash, followed a few seconds later by a booming report, and a missile screamed overhead, to fall into the sea with a series of large splashes some distance away to starboard. At the same time a signal was broken out at the foremast:

“Stop wireless or we sink you.”

It is safe to say that for a few minutes the majority of the crew of the *Franz Bauermann* did not in the least realize what had befallen them. Up to now the strange conduct of the distant craft had aroused in them more curiosity than alarm. Even now they could not quite get it into their heads that she was firing at them. It couldn't be genuine. Submarines they believed in; and, in a manner of speaking, were quite prepared for. But as for above-water enemy craft in these regions, that was surely a tale for the marines. The German Fleet, they knew, was prac-

tically bottled up, and would never venture far from its base. Besides, this wasn't a man-of-war at all, but a dirty old tramp. However, there was no getting over that gunshot. The stranger was an enemy, and meant business.

And then it dawned on them that there was little chance of their seeing their homes this trip. They had no visions of captivity in German hands; few of them had the slightest idea of what captivity in Germany might be like. No; all that immediately concerned them was that they were not going to get home after all. After all their toil, after all those weeks of digging out in a three-watch round, the hardest that any of them could remember, to be brought up with a jerk like this. It was too exasperating. And then a murmur of unmistakable anger arose. It betokened a determination to resist under any circumstances. "Just as soon be sent to the bottom as be all messed up like this," they murmured. And all the exasperation that had so often been levelled at the brass-mounted sons of so on and so forth located aft, was now turned with multiplied force at their country's enemies.

"What's going to 'appen now?" inquired Tug.

"What's going to 'appen?" a seaman replied vehemently. "Why, they'll knock 'ell out of us. That's what's going to 'appen. And we ain't got a thing to 'it back with. Nothing but taters to 'eave at 'em; the bloody swines!"

"Then we'll have to surrender?"

"Surrender me foot. D'ye think they want to be cluttered up with prisoners in that there packet? No,

sir. If you swines down below can't whack a few more knots out of 'er, we're doo for Davy Jones, an' you can lay a course to that."

"Boom!" Another shot was fired. "Boom!" Another. The enemy had more than one gun available.

Immediately afterwards the gong on the upper-deck sounded insistently. "Action Stations!"

Tug made a dive for the stokehold ladder. His station was the stokehold. A stoker off watch, he was an extra hand to reinforce the straining efforts of the firemen and trimmers. As he got down on the plates the stoker petty officer shouted to him: "Come on, come on; jump to it. Get all the coal you can out of that there bunker, and be as quick as you can."

The engineer had received orders from the bridge to spare nothing and nobody, but to get every possible ounce out of the engines.

"I don't care if you blow the boilers up," said the commander. "Burn all the coals you can; burn anything; but whack her up to the limit, and beyond it."

The men worked feverishly. The draught-plates were removed. Probably the boilers had never before contained such fires. And the result was soon felt in a pronounced vibration fore and aft. The straining engines were knocking out at least two extra knots.

But now noisy and devastating crashes began to be heard up above. The enemy were registering hits. Hits and more hits. An extra loud bang was heard coming from near the top of the stokehold-ladder, and immediately after a few bits of bent and twisted steel

fell with a noisy clatter on the stokehold plates. Without doubt the ship was getting badly knocked about. By a miracle, as it seemed, no steam-pipes, no vital part of the engine-room equipment had so far been touched, although the vessel had not been designed to withstand this sort of treatment. How they fared up above, no one had any time to consider. They were running for it, and that was primarily the stokers' job.

After twenty minutes' hammering it was discovered that the ship had begun to lose way. No vital part had been hit, but nevertheless it was clear to the engineer that the speed had fallen off substantially. And about this time the people in the stokehold made a discovery of their own. The ship had given a roll to starboard, and while poised on her side, Tug saw one of the floor-plates on that side of the stokehold lift ever so slightly. There was a squelching sound, and about a bucketful of dirty water squirted from the opening. Other eyes besides Tug's had witnessed the occurrence, and the meaning of it was quickly apparent to all. The bilges were full of water.

"Gaw' blimey! That's done it. The old hooker's goin' to glory."

It was certain that the *Franz Bauermann* was taking in water rapidly as the result of a serious hurt somewhere in her hull. Before long the plates were awash. Water was pouring into the port bunker, and the coal was being washed about the plates. There was also a perceptible and growing list to port. Soon afterwards the engines were stopped; an order to that effect had come down from the bridge. Then there

came the order to draw the fires. This was duly carried out, and after an inspection by the engineer, all hands were ordered on deck.

The sight that met Tug's eyes as he stepped out on to the sloping deck caused him a considerable shock. The poop was on fire and blazing furiously. The funnel looked like a sieve. Several of the cowls had disappeared. The deck cabins amidships were smashed to bits, while all along the deck were bent and twisted stanchions and bits of torn and bent steelwork. In addition to a palpable list, the ship was slightly down by the head, and it was fairly clear that she had not very long to live.

The hostile cruiser had ceased fire since the desperate condition of the Britisher was fully apparent. The German, for her nationality was proclaimed by the black-and-white ensign which was blowing out from the jack-staff on the poop, was cruising slowly round the stricken ship at a distance of less than a mile away.

On board the *Franz Bauermann* the commander, apparently unhurt, although many of his upper-deck hands were stricken down, still directed operations from the bridge. All hands were ordered on to the fo'c'sle. As soon as they were mustered they were divided into two working-parties to prepare rafts out of spare spars and pieces of timber. Every boat was hopelessly unfit for use; two of them had been smashed to matchwood. It was not at all certain what the enemy would do now. He might send boats, or he might not. Anyhow, they were not taking any chances. Better, after all, to be picked up somehow,

even to become prisoners of war, than to go down with the ship.

All at once the men heard a shouted ejaculation from the commander :

“ By Gad, she’s off.”

And then as the hands stopped work to gaze at the German, he shouted at them sharply :

“ Carry on there, carry on. And look lively about it. Some of you will get a bath pretty soon.”

All the same many hurried glances were directed towards the receding enemy. She was off right enough, and apparently at top speed. Volumes of smoke were pouring from her funnel, and her distance from the sinking *Franz Bauermann* was increasing rapidly.

All that had happened since the hostile intentions of the stranger had become manifest has not taken very long to recount. Nor did the time seem very long to the much-occupied engine-room hands. Actually more than three hours had passed, and the sun was already below the horizon. It was partly owing to the growing twilight that a completely new factor in the situation had not been observed. All therefore were startled when they heard the sound of a gun fired from an entirely new direction. No commands could prevent the men from ceasing work this time. Everyone gazed in the direction from which the sound proceeded. What they saw was a two-funnelled sloop about four miles away, and heading in their direction at all the speed at which it was capable. An enthusiastic cheer went up from every throat of the surviving *Franz Bauermann*, for the

approaching vessel was an unmistakable Britisher. Liberty and home after all! No wonder they cheered.

The sloop quickly came up, firing all the time at the German. When she was rather less than half a mile away, she stopped her engines, and lowered a boat. At the same time a vigorous semaphoring was carried on from her bridge, and answered from that of the sinking vessel. With little loss of time the sloop was under way again in pursuit of the fleeing enemy, the flashes of her guns, as well as those of the now distant German, gleaming brightly in the gathering dusk.

In a short time a ten-oared jolly-boat came alongside, and very glad were the survivors to drop into her, after carefully lowering the wounded. The survivors numbered twenty-nine all told; twelve others had been killed by the enemy's fire. It was quite dark when the boat drew away from the steamer. The latter was now very low in the water. Her stern still burned dully. They pulled away about a quarter of a mile and lay to.

For a time some of the survivors doubted if their condition was much better than before. Here they were in an open boat rising and falling on a fairly troubled sea. The sloop was leaving them fast. A few hundred yards away was the burning and sinking vessel that had lately been their home. Far away, to the left of the dying steamer, frequent flashes of gunfire were visible, and now and again a faint boom was heard, muffled by the waves. There were now no answering flashes; the German was intent on losing

herself in the night. After a time the gun flashes ceased altogether. Either the enemy was sunk, or, what was more probable, the chase had been abandoned. For what seemed a very long time they lay there. The fire on the poop of the *Franz Bauermann* suddenly became extinguished as that vessel made her final plunge to the bottom. The darkness was now complete.

"Blimey, what do we do now?" someone ejaculated.

The answer came shortly afterwards in the form of a flash and a report. A second or two later a star-shell cast its radiance over the water.

"That's the *Crimson Rambler*," said the coxswain.

The light of the star-shell died down and went out. Shortly afterwards a searchlight flashed out, quickly swung round through a small arc, and finally rested on the boat. The searchlight was extinguished; a signal lamp glowed in its place. It was answered by a light displayed in the boat. The distant light slowly came nearer, and after a time the dark outline of the sloop was dimly seen close at hand. About ten minutes later the survivors were safely on board.

CHAPTER XXV

HOME AGAIN

It was a cold morning in the early spring when Tug and the rest of the survivors of the *Franz Bauermann* waited on Charing Cross Station for the train to take them to Chatham. A constant stream of passengers passed on their way out of the station, well-dressed people mainly, men and women bound for offices and sale-rooms in the West End and the City. The major portion of them were young women. The War had now reached a stage when a very large proportion of the male workers had turned over their jobs to substitutes of the opposite sex. To these young women the shipwrecked mariners turned eyes that conveyed something like wonder. It was a very long time since any of them had seen a white woman. To behold them in such abundance was, in their own language, to take them all aback.

Fyson, as pretty a specimen of a foul-mouthed blackguard as an average lower deck could show, stood gazing wide-eyed and speechless for some minutes. Then he turned to Tug, who happened to be his nearest neighbour.

"Say, Towney, they're mighty fine," he said. "It'd be great to know one of them, wouldn't it? They don't 'ear the things that we 'ear." He meditated for a few seconds. Then he said: "I reckon

a mucko is about the lowest thing that Gawd created."

Some vague and shadowy regret passed through the mind of the hardened villain that spoke; a half-sigh escaped him. Then he added recklessly: "Well, I guess I'll get bloody-well soused to-night all right."

Tug Wilson was not wholly unmoved by the spectacle. These well-dressed and, in many cases, comely young women appeared eminently desirable.

Tug got a fortnight's leave. He found his father much the same as he had left him. His sister, Pudden, had grown taller and, he fancied, somewhat better-looking. He saw little of her, though. His father informed him that she "went about a lot with some young chap in a munition factory". "He gets pots of money, I hear," said Mr. Wilson. "He gets himself up an awful nib; but the Army'll have him before long."

Tug found the darkened London to which he returned was very different from the bright city which he had left a couple of years before. He found it hard to recognize the once-familiar localities. In his own city he felt more than ever an alien. When he came home on leave the last time the War had not reached that stage where the whole energies of the nation were turned towards the grim purpose of a fight to the death. Then he had found that the lives of the London citizens had not changed very much from their normal course. The people were interested in the War. They read the news eagerly. They cheered the departing recruits and the occasional marching battalions. They welcomed the men who came home on leave from the front or from the ships. But they

were not themselves in the War. They were little more than interested spectators.

But now what a difference! There was no question of the people being in the War. The darkened thoroughfares through which Tug groped his way homeward proclaimed a caution and a dread. Zeppelins and aeroplanes were carrying the War to the very homes of the citizens. Tug learned of destruction and devastation in the heart of the city, of citizens struck down while engaged in the least warlike of occupations, of old men, women, and children slain in their beds. This surely was a method of war unheard of, unless one harked back to the days of the Spanish Conquerors, or the Northmen of a still more remote age.

They were in the War with a vengeance. Men in khaki thronged the thoroughfares in the day-time. It seemed to Tug that every third man he met was in khaki. And there were women in khaki, and other uniforms. Women, large numbers of them, were taking an active part in the War. They were doing everything, it seemed, but the actual fighting. So far they had stopped just short of that; but some of them were very near the fighting-line. Apart from actual War service women were doing all sorts of unheard of jobs. On the railway station Tug saw women porters and women guards. When he got on a bus a woman conductor gave him his ticket. And Tug was amazed to observe that all these women, nearly all of the younger women, in fact, were wearing short skirts. These active duties, entirely new to women, had started an entirely new fashion in their dress.

For the first time, perhaps, in recorded history, grown women were displaying their lower limbs as a matter of course, and no one thought anything of it. Tug had to blink once or twice and ask himself if this was really his native land.

There was a shortage of food. Tug found that the people were being rationed. Some of the commonest eatables were incredibly scarce and their prices were exorbitant. In Tug's neighbourhood potatoes were not to be obtained.

There was, however, no shortage of amusements. After observing the scarcity of almost everything else he was not a little surprised to find that theatres, music-halls, and cinemas were alive and abundant.

He went one evening with his father to see a naval film. It was a War-time film of American production, and it disclosed, even to Tug's father, a total misconception of the realities of a navy at war. The British people had got long past the stage when any conception of war as a vehicle for romantic and chivalrous hostility was likely to arouse enthusiasm. By now they knew war for what it was if the Americans did not, and the picture, admirably staged though it was, met with no other reception from the audience than a number of adverse and outspoken criticisms and some derisive laughter. What they saw was a picture entitled "Old Glory Does It", an American naval film wherein spies, crooks, naval officers, hoodlums, gobs, and waterside rats conspired, fought, made love, or fell down stairways, according to their particular function in the play.

They saw mighty battleships with trellissed masts

ploughing their way through a beautifully impressive sea. They saw patently obvious spies plotting ostentatiously within earshot of a wise-looking agent of the Naval Secret Service. They saw a naval lieutenant-commander of magnificent presence but incredible stupidity made the easy dupe of a beautiful female spy. For a moment they were thrilled when the naval officer, with consummate ease, knocked out four hoodlums, one after the other, who attempted to hold him in unlawful detention. But they felt somehow that the story became entirely unreal when the afore-said female spy, through a dawning love for her gallant dupe, restored to him the secret code which she had filched from him and renounced for ever her devious and erring ways. But the piece was thrilling in its way, and always at the proper moment there appeared on the screen those joyous, white-capped American seamen—or gobs—who formed the comic, but always heroic, setting to the piece.

The play wound up with a ballroom scene of great magnificence, in which Adonis-like naval officers danced with beautifully-dressed women, and from which, eventually, the hero led the heroine to an adjoining lounge, happily free from loungers, there to declare his affection and consummate it with an emphatic and prolonged kiss, a “close-up” which brought the picture to a spicy end.

The naval film, which formed the grand piece of the evening, was followed by a shorter and lighter picture play—also an American production—called “Co-eds on the Campus, or Who’s Looking for a Sheik?” The boisterous gaiety and irresponsibility of

the American college students, male and female, formed a notable contrast to the dramatic intensity of the big picture.

Several times throughout the performance of the naval film Tug would have liked to point out the merits and demerits of the picture, and to have explained some of the technical details to his father, but the rapidity of the action gave him no chance.

"What did you think of it?" Mr. Wilson asked his son when they got outside.

Tug replied with one word:

"Bilge."

CHAPTER XXVI

CHATHAM IN WAR-TIME

WHEN Tug went to Holborn Viaduct Station one morning early to return to Chatham on the expiration of his leave, he looked round among the throng of service-men for some of his late shipmates. But he saw no one that he knew except a young ordinary seaman who had been rated on the *Agesilaus* but a short time before. This youth, whose name was Alletson, was accompanied by his mother, who had come to see him off. She was a good-looking and very tidily dressed person of about thirty-six or thirty-seven years of age. Actually she looked about ten years younger. She had an obvious regard amounting almost to veneration for her son, whom Tug knew as a rather unbridled youth who appeared to have the makings of a bad egg. He had not been notable for hard work or application to duty in the ship. Indeed, there were rumours that he had been sent to join the prize crew of the *Franz Bauermann* as a good means of getting rid of him. To Tug he appeared a trifle shy of the presence of his mother on the station, but she no sooner realized that Tug had been her son's shipmate than she greeted him with every sign of friendliness.

"You going back to Chatham with Mark?" she asked, indicating her son.

Tug nodded an acquiescence.

"He's a good lad, is Mark," she said, regarding her son fondly.

"Yes?" said Tug.

She regarded Tug for a few moments with a wistful kind of expression.

"You don't booze, and get tight, and all that, do you?" she asked him at length.

"Not me," replied Tug. "I reckon that's a mug's game. Especially on our pay."

"You're right. I thought you didn't by the look of yer." Then, after a while, she added: "I say, would yer mind keeping an eye on Mark till 'e gets to the depot? 'E's all right, but 'e's young. 'E means all right."

"Right-o," replied Tug. He did not himself see what good he could do by "keeping an eye" on the youth.

"'E's a good lad, is Mark." Then she added impressively: "'E's got good connexions, wonderfully good connexions. You might not believe it, but 'e 'as. I suppose you think Mark's a funny name. 'E's named after somebody big, 'e is. An' 'e do take after 'im in 'is looks."

At that moment Mark, who had wandered some distance away from his parent, came up with an attempt at a nautical swagger.

"I say, Towney," he said to Tug, "I lost twenty-two quid at Crown an' Anchor on the trip 'ome."

"More bloody fool you," Tug muttered under his breath, but not loud enough for Mark's mother to hear. He did not want to hurt her feelings.

"That's right, 'e did," she corroborated. "Twenty-two pounds; all 'e'd saved through the commission."

She nodded her head at her son, half-reproachfully, half-admiringly.

"You sailors! You don't care a brass farden for anything," she added.

Yes. Tug remembered that Crown and Anchor board run by Fyson on the fore well-deck of the *Franz Bauermann*. He remembered Fyson and his leather-lunged oratory.

"Plank it down, me lucky lads. Plank it down thick and 'eavy. No limits in this 'ere firm. We pays out in 'undreds. Up she comes again, three 'ooks. You're unlucky, sir, this time."

Alletson was generally the unlucky one. He was inevitably the unlucky one in the end. In any case a fellow like Fyson would not be long in gaining possession of the cash of a young fool like Alletson.

Much as Tug despised the young ordinary seaman, he could not help feeling a species of compassion for him, but more especially for the woman who had had the misfortune to bring him into the world.

When Tug returned to Chatham Barracks he found himself among a crowd of complete strangers. The rest of the survivors of the prize crew of the *Franz Bauermann* were scattered about in different blocks of the barrack buildings. Much as he would have liked to encounter a friendly face among the crowd of men in the big mess-room, he was by now too seasoned a man-of-war's man to be made in the least degree miserable by such an isolation.

In a naval depot men do not make ready acquaintanceships as they do in a man-of-war. In the depot one has always a sense of impermanence. New faces appear, one gets used to them, and then, one morning, one finds they are gone. Always people are coming and going. What is the use of striking up friendships in these circumstances? Tug was not one to make ready friendships in any circumstances, and as none of the other men seemed disposed to seek his acquaintance, by the time a week had passed away he was hardly on nodding terms with anyone.

Then, one evening, a familiar face appeared. It was his old shipmate, Shiner Wright. Shiner returned to the depot exactly seven days after his time, and he looked as if he had recently come in for some heavy treatment. A formidable-looking bandage encircled his brow, and his blue jean collar was blood-stained in large patches.

In answer to the curious inquiries of his roommates, he displayed not the least reticence about his adventures. According to his own account he had in his possession on the previous day a sum of three pounds and some odd shillings. This money he kept stowed away in his cholera belt. After a considerable number of drinks at a pub situated somewhere in the outskirts of Chatham, he had proceeded, later in the evening, into the more populous quarters of the town. Somewhere in that neighbourhood he had picked up with a prostitute (a "bag", he called her, using the common lower-deck parlance), and with this woman he had gone to a house in a remoter part of the town.

Now Shiner was no fool, in some respects at least.

Without being in any way mean or niggardly, he was able to boast with a fair amount of truth that no one had ever managed to get his money away from him against his will. He could, and did very often, get insensibly drunk, but whatever reserve cash he possessed always remained with him at the end of the bout. Hence that three pounds stowed in the flap of his cholera belt. A man may get as drunk as a fiddler, but however helpless he may become, the removal of anything from a cholera belt worn next to the skin presents a rather difficult task for even the most expert pickpocket.

Shiner went to bed with the woman, and stayed there all night. He did not remove the cholera belt, but the fact that he was undressed reduced to a large extent the difficulty of getting to that safe deposit. And so it came about that in the early hours of the morning, when Shiner's breathing announced in stentorian tones that he was well asleep, the woman decided that the opportunity was a good one to relieve him of some of the contents of that belt. Unfortunately for her the belt was rather tight, and Shiner had taken the additional precaution of wearing it with the small pocket inside, that is to say, next to his skin. In her efforts to get her fingers inside the flap she paid too little attention, as it turned out, to a small table which stood alongside the bed, and which, owing to its very close proximity and the fact that it was covered with bottles and glasses, formed a rather dangerous adjunct to the operation. A more prudent thief would certainly have removed it before getting to work. As it was, she pushed against it rather

heavily, and although the push was not sufficient to overturn it, a couple of empty bottles which stood upright near the edge wobbled for a moment or two, and finally one of them fell with a crash on the linoleum-covered floor. The woman tried to pull her hand away, but the noise brought Shiner sufficiently to his senses to realize that something untoward was happening about his person. In a flash he was wide awake.

Let Shiner now recount in his own words what followed.

"I woke up an' found the bitch tryin' to rob me. She 'ad 'er 'and in me cholery belt. By Gawd, I nearly throttled 'er. Then I chucked 'er over the bed and wolloped her good an' 'ard. Gawd, you should 'ave 'eard 'er language. I should say she was the cream o' society.

"I got up an' started to dress. And then—Zonk! Something 'it me. She'd crowned me with a bottle. I made for 'er an' she 'ollered blue murder. And then the door opened an' some Erb came in—a ponce of 'er's, I expect. 'E went for me, the poor crab. I took 'is photo all right, an' down 'e went on the deck. I 'ad no more trouble with 'im.

"Then the bitch 'eaved another bottle at me an' bunked out o' the door in 'er nightdress. Before I got properly dressed I 'eard 'er bawlin' for the police at the front door. That did it. I 'opped out o' the winder an' down a drain-pipe, over a couple o' garden walls, an' got clear. Me money was all right."

This epic story of the beach—the sort of story that is not at all uncommon among a certain class of

matloes—was listened to with a curious interest by Shiner's mess-mates, and then instantly forgotten. Shiner's bandaged pate continued to be noticed for a very, very short time as a new feature of the surroundings, and then that, too, was taken as a matter of course.

Tug went ashore that evening for the first time since his return from leave. If he had not noticed the vast increase in the number of uniformed men while he was in London he could not have failed to notice it here in Chatham. In the central parts of the town the main streets during the early evening time were packed with soldiers and sailors. In the roadway, as well as on the pavements, they walked or loitered, singly or in groups, and the traffic was at times very much impeded by their presence. The tramcars especially were forced, while traversing these thoroughfares, to crawl along at a walking pace, and the bells rung by their drivers for the purpose of clearing a passage through the throng made a continuous and monotonous accompaniment to the noises of the crowd. As darkness fell the numbers greatly diminished. The darkened streets had little attraction for the majority. They found better entertainment in the music-halls and picture-houses. A large number of them swarmed into the public-houses, which soon became filled to overflowing.

Occasionally there was trouble with drunken men, though not so often as one might suppose, taking into account the numbers of unruly characters that a packed garrison town must inevitably produce. The dark streets made a poor stage for the activities of

the "fighting drunks". Your soused husky usually likes an audience for the display of his bellicosity. That he himself should be able to see what he is doing may not, perhaps, be so important. But as a quencher of the fighting spirit darkness is almost as effective as a stream of water from a fire-hose.

Before returning to the barracks Tug turned into the door of "The Jolly Foretopmen" with the idea of getting himself a drink. For one of his unconvinical nature he was particularly unfortunate in his choice of a public-house. "The Jolly Foretopmen" was a favourite resort of some of the most accomplished soakers of Chatham. It was also the scene of frequent disturbances, and on this account and also because of its unsavoury reputation in another respect, the naval authorities had more than once threatened to place it out of bounds for the sailors. Tug, however, was in a sense new to Chatham; he knew little or nothing about the pubs and their various reputations. He was thirsty and wanted a drink, and "The Jolly Foretopmen" happened to be the house nearest to hand. Accordingly he pushed open the door and stepped inside.

Through the thick haze of tobacco smoke he saw a crowd of men, some of whom were drinking, others talking, some shouting, a few singing. Nearly all of them were uniformed man-of-war's men; there were one or two in civilian garb, men whose dark-blue jerseys proclaimed them none the less to be men of the sea; here and there was a man in the khaki uniform of a soldier. The small bar was packed, and Tug paused on the threshold undecided whether to

push his way through the throng to the counter or seek refreshment elsewhere. Suddenly he felt his sleeve pulled. He looked round and beheld his shipmate of the *Agésilas*, the stoker Fyson.

"'Ere y'are, boyo. Come round 'ere," shouted Fyson. "Let 'im come by," he said to another bluejacket who was trying to explain in reiterated phrases to a couple of cronies that "war ain't no bleed'n game o' shove-'apenny, it ain't".

The sailor stopped his discourse for a moment as he turned his blear-eyed regard to Tug's countenance. Then he moved a few inches on one side to let him pass.

"What y'avin', old Tug?" said Fyson.

"Just a beer," replied Tug. He would have preferred different company, but he did not want to appear ungracious in return for his shipmate's hospitality.

Fyson pushed his way to the counter.

"Two pints," he shouted.

Tug now observed that his old shipmate had already taken about as much as he could carry.

"Two pints," Fyson shouted again as the barman passed hurriedly on the other side of the counter.

"All right, all right," said the man. "Can't attend to 'alf a dozen at once."

"'Ere," Fyson said suddenly to a flashily-dressed woman near to him whom Tug observed for the first time. "You'll 'ave one with me. Drink up, Poll." He turned once more to the counter.

"Another pint fer the lady," he bawled.

The woman nodded her head. She was about

thirty years of age. Tug noticed that her face was plentifully powdered and her lips a bright red.

"'Ere's yer two pints," said the barman, smacking down two mugs on the counter.

"I said another one," said Fyson. "Poll 'ere." He pointed to the woman. "I want three pints."

Rapidly the man produced another mug of beer. Fyson dug his hand into his trouser pocket and produced a handful of silver and coppers, from which he slowly counted out the price of the beer.

"'Ere y'are, Poll. Get that down yer." He paid the barman and then turned a flushed countenance towards Tug. His eyes were half-closed and his lower lip hung downward. He spoke thickly and haltingly.

"Tug Wilson. You're a good shipmate. I always said you was. Drink up an' 'ave 'nother. See that tart over there? She's a goo' woman, she is. Ain't no better. Drink like a bloody whale.

"'Ere, Poll. I say, Poll," he said. "An old ship o' mine." He took hold of Tug's arm and pulled him forward.

The woman called Poll was holding an animated discussion, plentifully interlarded with oaths, with a marine who stood on the other side of her. She turned her head in Tug's direction.

"Blimey, what a gate this towney o' mine's got," she said, indicating the marine, who was holding a mug of beer with one hand and trying to pull her round to face him with the other, at the same time muttering: "Listen a-me."

"Take your bloody mitts off," she said to the marine. "I want to talk to this young man."

The marine, still grasping the woman's shoulder, turned towards Tug.

"You run away and . . ." he began.

"Take your blasted maulers off me," screamed Poll at him. "What d'ye reckon I am, then?" She shook herself free.

"Look 'ere. That's all right," Fyson intervened. "Old ship o' mine. Ain't yer, old Tug?"

"I don't care nothing about . . ." the marine shouted belliciously.

"Oh, dry up," Poll interrupted angrily. "Who wants to listen to your gate? I want to talk to this nice young towney of mine here. What's yer name, Towney?"

So far Tug had not spoken. He was, in fact, wondering how he could gracefully retire from a company which he did not altogether relish.

"What's 'is name!" Fyson suddenly bawled with an explosion of senseless laughter. "What's 'is name! Why, that's old Tug Wilson, that is. Old ship o' mine, ain't yer, Towney?"

"Yes," corroborated Tug.

The woman sidled up to him.

"Got any cash, dearie? 'Course you 'ave. You ain't been long ashore, I know. Been foreign? Eh?"

"You've come to the wrong bloke for cash," Tug responded uneasily.

"Don't tell me that, Towney. I know better. Tell you what. Take me out of 'ere. I know a nice little place."

"'Ere. 'Ave some more beer," interrupted Fyson.

"I ain't drunk yer rotten beer," the marine said

to him with a mournful air. Then, all at once, he got very angry, and before Fyson could make any reply he shouted at him threateningly:

"I tell yer I ain't drunk yer beer."

He raised his fist and hit Fyson on the side of the face. It was not a heavy blow, but Fyson was not very steady on his feet. He staggered and fell heavily against another man and finally flopped on the floor.

"'Old that one," said the marine, standing with his legs wide apart.

Tug bent down to help his old shipmate to rise, but the woman Poll grabbed him by the arm.

"Leave 'im alone. He's all right," she said. "Come outside along with me. I know a nice place; fine." But Tug paid no heed to her.

Fyson staggered on to his feet and, lowering his head, went for the marine. A confused combat followed in the crowded bar. Some of the men were shoved this way and that by the combatants as well as by others who were trying to get out of their way. Tug was thrust against the counter. A glass fell off and was smashed on the floor at his feet. The pressure round him was relieved after a while as the combatants struggled away towards the back of the bar. But Tug had no sooner left the counter than he found himself crushed against the wall. He could not see Fyson or the marine, but the sound of blows and the constant stream of oaths assured him that the fight was still in progress. Poll had also disappeared from his vicinity. A squat but muscular barman pushed his way into the midst of the struggling mass. After a time the fight was stopped by some means that Tug

could only guess. He caught a glimpse of the marine, capless, being thrust out of the door. He was bawling oaths and imprecations. The barman stooped, and Tug saw him fling a shapeless object—it was the marine's cap—out of the door.

Tug had had enough of "The Jolly Foretopmen". He sidled his way out to the street and made his way back to the barracks.

Two days later, in company with five other stokers, among whom was his old shipmate Shiner Wright, he left the depot to join the light cruiser *Camborne*.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE "CAMBORNE"

ON a hazy and windless afternoon in the early summer the *Camborne*, in company with a division of destroyers, might have been seen steaming through the North Sea at a speed of a little more than twenty knots some distance to the north of the Dutch Frisian Islands. There was no horizon to be seen. The range of visibility was no greater than about three-quarters of a mile in any direction, and the calm, dull green sea gradually lost its tint as it receded distantward until it merged at length into the grey background of the hazy atmosphere. Nothing else was visible to the scanning eyes on board the ships comprising the small squadron or flotilla, except that very occasionally a small black object would show itself as the rise and fall of a wave would reveal a floating mine.

Tug was on watch in the for'ard boiler-room. He found his job of attending to one of the large oil-fired boilers, with its unfamiliar arrangement of drums and water-tubes, a very quiet and unhurried one after the straining and sweating work of the coal ships to which he had hitherto been accustomed.

It was getting near seven bells in the afternoon when suddenly there was heard the noisy rattle of the stokehold "buzzer". It was the call to "Action Stations". A few moments later the artificer engineer,

whose duty it was to take control of the for'ard boiler-room, came climbing hastily down the ladder. The warrant officer stepped quickly up to the nearest boiler and glanced at the gauges. As he did so he blew out his breath noisily, as if he had just taken part in a strenuous race. Then he heaved a prodigious sigh.

"We're going to see something, I think," he said to the petty officer.

Tug, who overheard the remark, thought they were not likely to see very much down where they were, but naturally in the circumstances he said nothing.

The artificer engineer was a small man named Marley. He spoke quickly, and moved quickly with a sort of dancing movement. It was believed that he was an enthusiastic dancing man. He had a habit, whenever he wanted to speak to anyone, of sliding up to him on tiptoe. When anyone addressed him he would swing round suddenly on his toes, place one foot forward and bend his body so that his stern was stuck well out, thus striking what he imagined to be a graceful attitude.

He had two favourite words in his vocabulary: "Scandalous" and "Colossal", and he brought them to bear at every conceivable opportunity.

Quickly additional burners were set going in the furnaces, the fans were accelerated, and the speed of the ship was worked up until she was doing all the knots of which she was capable. The noise in the boiler-room now became very great indeed, and it was exceedingly difficult to make out a spoken order.

Very soon a series of palpable jolts indicated that the guns up top were being fired.

Tug saw Mr. Marley go up to the petty officer and bawl in his ear. He just caught the words "Hun destroyers". The petty officer nodded and the engineer nodded back. Very soon the news was in possession of everyone in the stokehold.

The information that Mr. Marley had imparted to his subordinate was correct. The temporary lifting of the haze over the sea, owing to a slight breeze that had arisen, had revealed the presence, some four or five miles away, of three long, low, short-funnelled steamers whose immediate change of course and precipitate flight labelled them at once as enemy craft. Immediate chase and action was signalled from the *Camborne*, and forthwith the small British squadron proceeded at top speed after the fleeing Germans.

The sudden demands on the engines of the *Camborne* and the inevitable large and sudden increase of fuel consumption also resulted, most unfortunately as it turned out, in a temporary increase in the volume of smoke emitted from the funnels. The for'ard set of boilers were the greatest sinners in this respect, and it was from the fore funnel therefore that a long stream of black smoke issued forth to trail along the upper works of the ship, enveloping the six-inch gun platforms in a smudgy haze, and rather discommoding the gunlayers and guns' crews. A complaint was forwarded to the bridge, and the captain directed a lieutenant to give the for'ard boiler-room a "jerk".

However, by the time this officer had stepped to the telephone and got the connection with the for'ard boiler-room the trouble had died down and the smoke conditions were normal again. But Lieutenant Cripps had been told to give the boiler-room a jerk, and being what is known in the Navy as a "sarky" person, he thought it just as well to shake up the people down below with a few well-chosen words.

"Below there; for'ard boiler-room," he called. "What are you trying to do down there? Make a smoke-screen?"

A pause; and then:

"Can't hear," floated up to his listening ear.

"I say, are you trying to make a smoke-screen?" he bawled.

This time the answer came: "Right."

It was Mr. Marley who had answered the navy-phone call. But the din in the stokehold was very great, and for a time he could make nothing of what was said. He placed his hand over his other ear and listened with all his might. He heard a mumble, and then came the words fairly distinctly:

". . . make a smoke-screen."

Mr. Marley hung up the receiver and danced away from the bulkhead. The petty officer was standing still and looking at him expectantly. Mr. Marley slid up to him and, poising himself on his toes, bawled up at him. The petty officer, who was a tall man, bent down and placed his hand to his ear.

"Want a smoke-screen. . . . Give 'em a good 'un. . . . Colossal."

The petty officer nodded and straightened himself

up. Mr. Marley was not the sort of person to do things by halves. A few minutes later the people on the upper deck became aware of a tremendous volume of thick and heavy black smoke pouring from the fore funnel. It drooped at once and spread downward and outward behind the funnel, forming a dark pall impenetrable to the eyesight. On deck it was soon darker than the blackest night. Then lurid and sanguinary were the curses and swear words that came from the guns' crews, for the view was entirely blotted out, not only that of the ships at which they had been firing, but also the very guns which they were trying to serve.

And by the time that the people in the for'ard boiler-room had been made, with the help of suitable or unsuitable comments on their "savvy", to understand what was required of them, and the result of their well-meant but misdirected effort had blown away, it was found that the haze had once more settled down, and the enemy ships were no longer visible. Naturally the men on the upper deck were not a little annoyed at what they considered the stupidity of their comrades down below, and they gave vent to their vexation in phrases that were not at all complimentary to the engine-room department of the ship.

The captain sent for the engineer commander, and there on the bridge the luckless engineer had to listen to a few tart and pointed comments on the intelligence of his staff. The engineer commander, of course, passed on the diatribe, together with a little corollary of his own, to the artificer engineer as soon

as "Action Stations" was called off. Mr. Marley left the engineer's office murmuring "Scandalous".

The ultimate result of this unfortunate affair was that verbal instructions of this kind given from the bridge to the boiler-room were altogether discarded. An electric gong was installed in the boiler-room, and a code of a simple kind was established by means of which it was hoped that misunderstanding of orders would in future be avoided.

The summer passed with frequent patrols, constant alarms, but comparative failure to bring the enemy forces to action. The strain imposed on the ship's company was nevertheless considerable. An untiring watchfulness and complete readiness for all emergencies was the indispensable condition of their existence. The very nature of modern sea warfare was such as to render them liable to the direst penalties should they be found wanting in the smallest degree in the very high standard of efficiency which their service demanded. The enemy, despite the foolish levity with which the mere mention of his sea forces was received by the uninformed, was far too clever to be given the smallest advantage which foresight and preparation might counteract. The men who manned the scouting forces of the British Navy, to give them only their due, were fully alive to what they were facing, and they could fairly claim that any mishaps that did occur were those which no amount of foresight and watchfulness could have averted.

And so the summer went by. The calm weather and slight seas which made these cruises, apart from considerations of the dangerous possibilities with

which they were attended, almost a pleasure to perform, now gave way to dull skies, gusty winds, and a choppy sea. To the consciousness of ever-present danger were added the bodily discomforts of a cold patrol.

One grey autumn afternoon the *Camborne* left harbour and proceeded on a course generally easterly that would bring her eventually to the neighbourhood of the coast of Holland. As the sun went down, the wind, which at the start had been light and fitful from the west, gradually crept round to west-south-west, became steady, and then grew stronger. The last appearance of the horizon before the sun went down betokened heavy weather before morning.

By nightfall the wind had increased considerably. The engines were slowed down, and throughout the night the ship laboured through an increasingly troubled sea at a bare fifteen knots. Before morning the wind was logged at gale force. Heavy blows were repeatedly felt as her nose hit a stiffer sea than usual. As the hands changed watch in the early hours of the morning a "buzz" of mysterious origin went round among the watchkeepers that the purpose of the cruise had been abandoned and that the ship was returning to harbour.

The arrival of daylight found the gale at its height. Nasty cross seas, steep and threatening, reared themselves on the port bow, paused, so it seemed, for a few seconds, and then flung themselves at the staggering cruiser. Floods of broken water surged over the upper deck, splashed violently against the casings and screen, and then scurried aft as the bows lifted slightly

to meet the next onslaught, while each time a diminishing cataract fell from the high fo'c'sle. But the ship gave way very little to meet the seas. Long, flat, and narrow, built somewhat on the lines of a destroyer, there was little about her design to enable her to ride comfortably over such waves as these. She pursued an inflexible course. She hit the seas, or the seas hit her; she staggered at the heavier blows, and her fabric shuddered; but through them all she went with a determination that was almost human. And in her deluged decks she exhibited the traces of each encounter.

Below decks the thumps and crashes, although still heavier since the gale had developed, sounded less alarming than during the dark hours. On the stokers' mess-deck rills of water trickled from starboard to port and from port to starboard as the deck swayed. This was the result of somebody's unlucky entry or exit when the hatch, raised at the wrong moment, or not closed at the right one, had admitted a torrent of water which the coaming had failed to arrest. The electric-lights still shone, for, of course, apart from the occasional and momentary raising of the hatch, no entry existed for the admission of daylight.

Tug had the forenoon watch. He had been transferred recently from the stokehold to the engine-room. Having finished his breakfast, a basin of tea and a chunk of bread smeared with margarine, and—most miraculous in the circumstances—a rasher of bacon fried and hot, he changed into stokehold rig and made his way via the upper deck to the for'ard engine-room.

Down there comparative peace reigned. The blows were more muffled; they sounded as if delivered through a kind of air cushion. The floorplates and bulkheads vibrated, it is true, but the disconcerting thuds were not nearly so violent down here. The watchkeepers, as nearly always they are when on watch in the engine-room, were silent while attending to their duties. (Officers are more in evidence in engine-rooms, and engine-room hands of whatever rating are never wholly at their ease while those gentlemen are about.)

Tug performed his round of duties as quietly as the rest. It was just after three bells; he had completed filling the cup of a lubricating pipe when the whole space in which he stood gave a violent lurch forward, and a deep and heavy thud was felt that nearly threw him off his feet. Every watchkeeper stopped dead and remained for an appreciable interval in the attitude in which he happened to be. The engineer of the watch—it was the senior engineer-lieutenant—had his hand raised half-way to a pressure gauge. It remained there for quite three seconds before it slowly sank to his side. All eyes were directed instinctively towards him as the natural leader in an emergency. All hands had made a pretty shrewd guess as to the meaning of that thud. It was no sea this time; everyone knew that.

The engineer took a step forward and raised his hand.

"Carry on," he said in a gruff voice. Then he made a hasty survey of certain of the gauges. The for'ard set of engines were still revolving.

Clang!

Everyone was still more visibly startled this time. Nerves were now undoubtedly a bit on edge.

The engine-room telegraph pointed to "Stop".

The engine-room artificer swung round the regulator. The quivering ceased. Except for the rising, falling, and swaying of the ship's fabric the engine-room was still.

Then was seen the effect of the peculiar discipline practised in the Navy. None of these men knew precisely what had happened. None knew how near they were to abrupt extinction. All they knew was that a very ugly situation had arisen, that some catastrophe had occurred, that a howling gale was raging without, and that should the ship sink under their feet the chances of their reaching even the upper deck were small indeed. And the sense of their danger was not lessened by the absence of accurate knowledge with regard to it. Yet not one of them thought of even momentarily leaving his job. There was no machine for forcing immediate and unquestioning obedience such as exists among bodies of soldiers; no hierarchy of non-commissioned officers trained to exact a machine-like response to the most trifling commands; no detailed orders for the regulation of their duty and conduct in this emergency; nothing but the engineer's curt "Carry on". And yet it answered the purpose in this instance completely. The men continued on such jobs as the stationary engines required of them. When these were done they stood by and waited for further instructions.

The telephone rattle sounded an abrupt challenge.

The engineer strode quickly to the corner and took up the receiver.

"Yes . . ? Oh, yes, sir."

Someone in authority was calling the engine-room. Tug, who was standing near the engineer, heard his replies given in quiet and respectful tones, but of course he could not hear what was said at the other end. The engineer listened intently for a space.

"Yes, sir; so far as I can tell at present."

Another interval of intent listening; and then:

"Very good, sir."

The engineer hung up the receiver. He stood for a few moments, his head lowered in thought, his hands clasped behind his back. All the hands in the engine-room stood watching him expectantly. He made a gesture and was about to speak when he suddenly looked upward. A figure was hastily descending the ladder; it was the engineer-commander. He looked rather worried as he approached the senior. A conversation in subdued tones passed between them.

Tug listened anxiously, but heard little of their conversation. He caught the words "Flooding" and "Shore up". And he observed that both engineers looked at the bulkhead which divided them from the after engine-room. The engineer-commander even tapped it with his knuckles, though what he expected that to tell him was not clear.

But things were happening quickly now. Quite a number of figures were seen descending the ladder, and foremost among them was the carpenter. The hands who followed passed down sundry baulks of timber; some of them carried bags of tools. They

were not long in getting to work. In a comparatively short space of time the bulkhead was shored up, and all was done that forethought could devise to render secure this vital compartment of the ship.

In the meantime the news was whispered about among the watchkeepers—more or less near to the truth—as to the nature of the disaster. Tug learned that a mine had hit the ship somewhere near the stern, and that the after engine-room was flooded. Further odds and ends of news and rumours, some of them extravagant and contradictory, continued to float around. One said that the watchkeepers aft had been ordered on deck; another that "every mother's son of them had dipped"; a third stated that two only had got out alive. On one thing only were they all agreed. The ship had "copped a packet". Also there appeared no immediate danger of her sinking. There even appeared a chance of working her back to harbour under her own steam.

More conversations were held with the bridge by means of the navyphone. At length the order came to start the engines once more. Much depended on how they worked. The two engineers watched carefully as the engine was set going at dead slow. Seemingly it was well. More conversations with the bridge followed; and then a slight increase of speed was determined upon. But it was at a very slow gait that the crippled vessel began her cautious return to harbour.

Tug went off watch soon afterwards. He was very perturbed. Dinner was an anxious meal for everyone. All knew that everything depended upon that shored-up bulkhead. Would it hold? Would the straining

of the ship consequent upon her laboured passage through the troubled seas put the finishing touch to that which the catastrophe had already wrought? Few of the men had much appetite for dinner. But the midday tot had a wonderfully heartening effect. After drinking it the gale seemed less fierce; the good old *Camborne* felt more substantial and reliable. Weather it? Of course she'd weather it. Tug tackled his cold bully beef almost with gusto.

In the afternoon, as the hours passed by and nothing untoward seemed to happen, the outlook became notably brighter. The gale still continued, but every hour brought the ship a little nearer to safety. Tug kept the last dog watch. When he came off watch it was dark, but the somewhat unpleasant prospect of spending the night in a shattered craft on a stormy sea was notably brightened by the tidings that met him when he reached his mess. The storm was breaking. Already the wind had fallen considerably; the seas were less violent.

When he was called for the morning watch the weather was comparatively quiet. During the watch he was informed that a small aiding squadron had come up, and that the question of arranging a tow was under consideration. But the distance to harbour was not now very great, and the captain, possibly out of a species of bravado, decided, after consultation with the engineer commander, to dispense with towage.

All thereafter went well. By midday the *Camborne* had reached harbour, and was warped into dry dock. The ship's company were able to step on dry land.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AN OLD FRIEND AND AN ENTERTAINMENT

THE old battleship *Marathon* was moored in one of the basins in Chatham Dockyard. Just before the outbreak of War she was marked down to be sold as scrap. But the numberless unforeseen emergencies that arose soon after the outbreak of hostilities resulted, not only in her retention on the active list, but also in her being placed in the fighting line on several occasions when it was not deemed politic to risk the more valuable ships. Her twin funnels and antiquated fighting-tops had formed marks for the German gunners many times off the Belgian coast in the early days of the War. At the Dardanelles she had expended a prodigious quantity of ammunition, and run enormous risks, while plastering the Turkish trenches throughout the operations of that unfortunate expedition. She had had several miraculous escapes from torpedoes fired at her while patrolling those dangerous waters, and her upper-works still showed many a scar that the land batteries of the enemy had inflicted upon her. Now, in honourable retirement at Chatham, she served a useful though less exciting purpose. Her spacious decks formed ample accommodation for those ship's companies or other bodies of sailors that the authorities desired to keep together.

It was to the *Marathon* that the crew of the

damaged *Camborne* were ordered to repair on their return from leave. To Tug Wilson, who had served for a very long time in small cruisers, the interior of the battleship seemed enormous. Whereas hitherto it seemed that he had scarcely been able to move about without cannoning into someone, now it seemed he had to go quite a long distance to get anywhere in the ship.

The circumstances under which the *Camborne* had been brought back to harbour had reflected not a little credit on the ship's company. Their coolness under rather trying conditions had not passed without notice by the captain of the ship, and in his report to the admiral he gave praise without stint to both officers and men. The higher powers governing the fleet were not a little gratified at the preservation of a valuable fighting unit in circumstances where its total loss might reasonably have been expected, and they gave expression to their gratification by the award of a number of decorations to the more outstanding persons connected with the affair. Two of these decorations came to the engineer-commander and the senior engineer-lieutenant respectively. For the men there were no D.S.O.'s or Crosses of the Legion of Honour, but a few of them did get something which, from their point of view, formed, perhaps, a more substantial reward for their heroism.

Not a little to his surprise Tug Wilson was singled out for one of these awards. The engineers, in the goodness of their hearts, decided that the vacancies among the higher ratings of stokers caused through the catastrophe in the North Sea, ought to be filled by

promotion from the ranks of the existing personnel. Looking through the records of their men they found that First-Class Stoker Ernest Wilson, First-Class for Leave, First-Class for Conduct, Abilities Superior, had a record as good as that of anyone else of his own rating. Accordingly one morning Tug was instructed to put in a request to see the captain in order to be rated Acting Leading Stoker.

This unexpected promotion, coming as it did when the tidings from the various fronts betokened the approaching end of hostilities, rather altered Tug's outlook with regard to the Navy. He had originally joined for the duration of the War, and throughout his service he had given little thought to the future beyond wondering if the War would ever come to an end. Having no idea of continuing service after the conclusion of hostilities, he had never troubled himself with considerations about promotion. He just did his job to the best of his ability, and that was the end of it. But now, all unexpectedly, he found himself with one foot on the ladder, and, although he had never possessed a remarkable amount of self-confidence, he could not help asking himself, now that this thing had happened to him, if he had not sufficient intelligence and application to reach considerably higher. With all his modest self-esteem, the answer was an undoubted "Yes".

In a few days his mind was made up. He would stick to the Navy. He would sign on for long service, and devote all his energies to an effort to climb as high up the ladder as it was possible for him to go. Having made this resolve, he found his interest in

life generally very much altered. His duties ceased to present themselves as an irksome round to be endured with whatever patience and fortitude he could summon. They were now, to him, a means of gaining a desired end. He tackled them with enthusiasm. He found his job interesting.

Glowing with his new-found enthusiasm he found more to interest him in the dockyard. He made the acquaintance of leading hands and petty officers. Some of them took him to their messes in other ships. He went into the stokeholds and engine-rooms of different ships, and he saw them with a new interest. He read the stoker's manual assiduously. He managed to borrow one or two books on the elementary principles of heat engines. In the Navy he had now a large and definite aim, apart from his share in a War whose object he did not understand, and for whose conduct, it must be said, he had but little enthusiasm.

More than once of late Tug had been asking himself what all this tremendous convulsion was about. For what reason was he, with so many others like himself, living this life of hazard and unease? Why had they taken him to equatorial Africa to be badly knocked about, and all but slain by drilled niggers about whom he knew nothing, and cared nothing? To serve what purpose had those late shipmates of his—one of them was a newly-joined hostilities stoker—drowned like rats in the after-engine-room of the *Camborne*. What great end had he, and others like him, in view through all this uncomfortable business? Tug did not know. He had recently come to admit to himself that he did

not know. He read in the daily newspapers that this War was a fight for World Democracy; but with all the goodwill in the world he was forced to acknowledge that he found this doctrine unconvincing. He read in these same newspapers that all Germans were brutes, and he tried hard to believe that such was the case. He summoned to his recollection all he had heard about the shooting of defenceless Belgians and the deliberate drowning of peaceful merchant sailors. But ever to the fore among these considerations came the reflection that discipline, that supreme and ruthless attribute of war, was a force against which no sentiment of mercy, of kindness, of humanity, or even of decency, had the slightest avail. Tug knew what discipline was. He knew by now that once a man became a part of that vast and intricate machine designated "The Forces of the Crown", he was no longer permitted to give effect to any sentiment of his own. In all circumstances he had to do as he was told. Certain sentiments, indeed, were prescribed for him, and the sooner he adjusted himself to them, and the more forceful expression he gave to them, the better he became from a Service point of view.

Since, then, both action and sentiment were governed by the higher powers that were vested in the commanding officers, what was the use of trying to fix the responsibility for any act on the individual soldier or sailor? By the time Tug arrived at this conclusion he had ceased to regard the Germans as anything but machine-driven units that circumstances had placed on the opposite side to his own. He had to kill them, if he could, and they had to kill him.

Whatever each of them was told to do, he must do it. It was a state of affairs about which it seemed useless to speculate, much less to argue.

On more than one occasion Tug found himself involved in argument with his shipmates over the object of the War, and the reason for their part in it. There always seemed to be arguments going on over this matter. The question was of such a degree of simplicity that no two opinions with regard to it seemed to coincide. When, therefore, Tug read in certain newspapers that the British land and sea forces, in order to attain the ends for which they had taken up arms, were striving with a species of white-heat enthusiasm that no sufferings or disasters could quench, he was forced to ask himself what sort of an object it could be in regard to which no two of his acquaintances were in agreement.

And granted that the men did not know what they were fighting for, it did not require any profound reasoning to arrive at the conclusion that the making of the War, if it was not the result of a conspiracy of measureless wickedness on the part of some person or persons, was at all events a senseless abomination for which no one, according to the accepted order of things, seemed to be accountable. To this conclusion all of Tug's acquaintances, save a few unteachable jingoes, eventually came. Their prime interest in the War resolved itself into a strong desire to see it *concluded*. That was the mighty object of their present hopes and striving. True, they accepted without question the doctrine that surrender was inadmissible, but given a balance of victory they would

have rejoiced in a peace and dispensed with all the cant regarding war aims.

All at once an astounding change came over the War. Without any indication that such a state of affairs was impending, it became suddenly clear that the enemy countries were at their last gasp. A few short and hectic weeks, a series of startling bulletins, and the War was over. The great end, so far as Tug and his shipmates were concerned, was attained.

By this time Tug had found another source of interest. He had a girl. Renie Hackett was the daughter of a bargee who lived on the outskirts of Chatham. She was a quiet-mannered creature with light hair, grey eyes, and a serious outlook on life. She was not particularly fond of sailors in general—she saw too much of them and their seemingly unstable way of life—but she took to Tug amazingly. She worked behind the counter of a draper's shop in Gillingham, and often of an evening Tug met her at her place of work, and they spent the evening together. Once or twice Tug visited her at the small house where she lived—Number 5 Bollard Lane, close to Rochester.

One Saturday afternoon, while Tug was making his way to Bollard Lane, he stood for a few moments on the kerb at the busier part of the town, while he waited for the passing of the traffic to allow him to cross the road. All at once he felt the back of his neck pinched.

He turned round quickly. A shortish thick-set sailor stood beside him. The man's face was familiar.

The man nodded to him.

"Why, Chris Aitken! How are you?"

"Might be worse. Goin' up the line, old son?"

"No. Are you?"

"Sure."

"I'll come with you as far as the station."

They walked along the road together.

"What's become of you all this time?" asked Tug.

"Must be about three years since I left you in Chatham."

"So it is, Towney. An' some three years it's been to me, you can take it from me. D'ye remember I 'ad trouble with my missis?"

"Sure I do. I was sorry."

"Well, that's all right," said Aitken easily. "The day I left you I went to the pay bob to stop 'er separation allowance. 'E wanted to know what the trouble was all about, so I 'ad to tell 'im. 'E said: 'Why, you're a free man now then.' So I was, to be sure. It 'adn't struck me that way before. I 'adn't looked at it that way. But there I was, a free man with the world in front of me, as you might say. But that wasn't the end of it. I didn't know it at the time, but a brother of 'ers somewhere out in California 'ad died an' left 'er a fortune of nearly eight 'undred quid. She 'adn't told me nothing about it, of course. She an' this sojer bloke went on the bust with it, an' one night she got as drunk as a fiddler's greaser, an' got runned over in the Mile End Road. They took 'er to the London Orspital, but she *ex*-pired. So that was the end of 'er. But it wasn't the end of the cash she'd come into; there was all of five 'undred left o' that,

an' most of it came to this kid, after the Government 'ad 'ad their dig in."

"Have you got married again?"

"Not much."

"What've you been doing in the Andrew since?"

"I spent fifteen months in one o' them 'Q' boats, the *Andover*. There was a bit of 'Arry Tate's Navy about that. Nothing spick an' span. The messes 'ad to be kept A1, but on the upper-deck everything was slovenly. It was a queer sort o' business. It wasn't Navy, an' it wasn't Merchant Service. We was like a bloomin' 'tec 'anging round after a gang o' crooks. An' we copped more than one of 'em. But where've you been, old son? I see you've shipped the 'ook."

"Yes," said Tug, looking at the anchor on his sleeve. "I had a tremendous long time out in Africa. Out in the tropics."

"Oh, aye. I could tell yer a few things about them parts, too. East or West, was it? I've been in more than one dust-up with Arab dhows off the East Coast in my time. And that ain't a 'ealth resort. But I ain't never 'ad no experience like the *Andover*."

"Before that I was on the *Tittlebat* destroyer at the Battle o' Jutland. We copped a packet there, all right. We was blazing fore an' aft, an' only six of us got away un'urt. I was picked up by the *Usurper*."

As they turned a corner not far from the station they came suddenly upon a crowd of people. From the middle of the crowd there came the sound of two female voices raised in angry clamour. Tug and Aitken caught sight of two women, their faces thrust

forward to within a few inches of each other. They were abusing each other in shrill tones. The language of each of them was unrestrained in its violence; low adjectives passed two and fro between them with an ease and freedom which only continuous practice could give.

One of them suddenly raised her hand, and gave her opponent a hard slap on the face. A sharp scuffle followed. Fists and finger-nails were brought to bear. Hats were snatched off in the twinkling of an eye; hair was torn out in handfuls; and scratched faces bore witness to the intensity of the combat. The timely arrival of a couple of constables brought the affair to a summary conclusion.

"A lively pair, that," said Tug, as they passed on.

"They're always at it, them two. Two o' the women oo fell in the Great War."

Tug glanced backward, and recognized in one of the women who was gesticulating in the grasp of a constable, his old acquaintance of "The Jolly Foretopmen."

"Well, old son," said Aitken suddenly, "that'll be my train, I reckon. I must be off. Ten days, I've got. Hope you'll be a chief P.O. when I get back. So long."

A few days afterwards, as Tug was walking along the jetty alongside the battleship, he observed a couple of sailors industriously daubing paint on a large piece of canvas stretched on a wooden framework. On going closer to inspect this work, he found that the painted canvas resolved itself into a rather crude

resemblance to the exterior of a shop. It was, he discovered, a part of some scenery that was being prepared for a sketch, called "Putting the Brokers In", that was to be acted by sundry members of the ship's company. On what was represented as the shop-window he read the words:

PLUSHY AND JINGLES
RAG AND BONE MERCHANTS.

From inquiries he learned, what most of the ship's company already knew, that a concert was to be held on the upper-deck of the battleship in a few days' time. Tug had been so much immersed in his own concerns lately that he had heard nothing about the approaching concert. Now, turning the matter over in his mind, he remembered that he had been awakened one night recently by a couple of heavy-footed A.B.'s making a noise that sounded like a stampeding herd of elephants—actually Able Seamen Cobb and Slusher were practising a hornpipe. There had been other mysterious happenings in out of the way corners of the lower-deck on an evening time that, now Tug came to think of it, were inexplicable no longer. Of course these people had been rehearsing in their several ways for the approaching entertainment.

The concert was held on the ample quarter-deck of the *Marathon*. A stage was rigged for the performers, and there was ample seating accommodation for the large audience. A row of chairs in the front was reserved, of course, for the officers. The

remainder of the ship's company were accommodated on mess-stools. A good number of the lower-deck ratings, however, scorned the back seats. They preferred a higher, though somewhat less comfortable, perch on the top of a gun-turret. These people, like the gallery boys of a certain type of music-hall, were always the most noisy and vociferous part of the audience. It was known beforehand that there would be no lady friends among the audience, and this fact contributed not a little to the gusto with which a good many of the performers, and nearly the whole of the audience, entered into the spirit of the entertainment.

The show was started by the ship's volunteer brass band playing that stirring march "Colonel Bogey". The refrain was soon taken up as a rousing chorus by the bulk of the ship's company, who were massed at the back of the improvised auditorium. In consequence a great volume of sound floated over the dockyard, and caused many loiterers in the remoter parts of the neighbourhood, as well as those near by, to hasten in the direction of the ship to ascertain what was going on.

Following the overture an able seaman named Bateman sang "The Trumpeter" to a piano accompaniment played by an armourer named Stinson. The song lost some of its charm through the fact that Bateman sang it in a lower key to that in which Stinson accompanied him, or else Stinson played it in a higher key to that in which Bateman sang it; it all came to the same thing in the end. Bateman was also put off his performance somewhat by

Stinson's loud thumping; it seemed to the audience that Stinson was trying to drown the singer. More than once during the song Bateman attempted to remonstrate with him, but his most audible remonstrances had not the least effect on the accompanist. The audience did not ask for an encore.

An outstanding item of the entertainment was the sketch, got up by a couple of stokers, entitled, "Putting the Brokers In". It was the sort of show that the muckos delighted in. It was a knock-about farce in which a very fat policeman, with a very red nose, found himself involved in a series of cross-talk arguments with a married couple who were trying to "shoot the moon". The barrow-load of furniture and household utensils which had aroused the suspicions of the officer of the law, formed an important item in the story, and the ultimate débâcle of the officer, knocked down by a bedroom receptacle heaved at him by the lady, made a climax that met with the most enthusiastic applause from the packed mob of lower-deck men at the back of the auditorium. It was quite evident that the stokers who produced the piece knew their public pretty thoroughly. It was the most successful thing in the whole show.

Cobb and Slusher danced their hornpipe, and an engine-room artificer sung "There's a wee bonnie lassie". He appeared on the stage dressed in a kilt and sporran—the latter manufactured out of oakum. He wore a very large tam-o'-shanter, and carried a thick walking-stick with amazing twists in it. With the latter he emphasized the rhythm of his chorus—joined in with tremendous gusto by the audience—by

thumping it on the stage. Except for the costume and the Scotch dialect, there did not seem to be a great deal of point in the song, but for some reason or another it met with a very great reception.

The show wound up with a small one-act play, entitled, "Stolen Dispatches". This was rather an ambitious item. It was a spy play written by the captain of marines. Unfortunately for the success of his play Captain Lawler had allowed the military element to predominate to such an extent that his dialogue, so it seemed to the audience, consisted of little else than the bellowed orders from military officers and N.C.O.s to their rank and file. Thus, when the spy, in the disguise of a British infantry officer, was discovered rifling the unlocked desk of the general, and handed over to a military escort, it was:

"Escort, mark time!"

"Halt!"

"Right turn!"

"As y'were!"

"Prisoner and escort. Right turn!"

"Quick march!"

This sort of conversation made up a very large part of the dialogue, and short as the play was, many people found themselves yawning long before it was over.

To make matters worse, the captain had had insufficient time in which to train his troupe, and the play lost some of its significance through more than one of the actors forgetting their parts at the vital moment. The captain, conscious of the short-

comings of some of his actors, made a little speech before the piece began, in which he "hoped the audience would pardon a few possible slight mistakes."

One of his men got so flustered over forgetting his lines that he failed to hear the prompter, although everyone in the audience heard him plain enough, for he literally bawled the words after two or three unsuccessful attempts to make the actor hear, and added a few oaths and objurgations that certainly were not in the text. The actor placed his hand to his ear in a vain attempt to get the words. Finally, in desperation, he repeated his previous lines, as if that helped out the situation, and then, with a soapy smile on his face, sidled off the stage.

Slight mistakes!

CHAPTER XXIX

SHINER WRIGHT GOES ASHORE

“ A LEADIN’ stoker ain’t a bleed’n admiral.”

“ No?”

Shiner Wright took the half-smoked fag from his mouth, threw it on the deck, and savagely ground it with the heel of his boot.

“ You ain’t a full-blown killick yet, and don’t you forgit it,” he said. “ They’ve only lent yer that there ’ook.”

“ Never mind about that. You’re not smoking in the mess; not while I’m ’ere.”

Tug stood up and looked Shiner in the face. It was the first occasion when, as the leading hand of the mess, he had to exercise his authority over a difficult subject. And Shiner Wright was a difficult subject indeed. Always quarrelsome and truculent when under the influence of liquor, he was the sort of person that most leading hands would have been content to leave alone. And now, standing up in the mess, he realized that he, the redoubtable Shiner Wright, had somewhat tamely surrendered to Tug’s demand to “put that fag out”, and the realization had brought with it a wave of swift rising anger. He clenched his fists and gazed at Tug for a few moments, undecided whether to give expression to his acute vexation by a violent assault on him.

The atmosphere of the mess-deck rapidly became sultry. The buzz of conversation suddenly died down to an expectant silence, and all eyes were directed towards the pair. Tug, much slighter of build than his opponent, was conscious that his breathing had become a little difficult, but he tried hard not to flinch. Even when Wright thrust his knobby and lined countenance within a few short inches of his nose, at the same time fixing him with a baleful glare, he receded hardly an inch.

It looked as though it might go ill with Tug. His burly opponent could have pulverized him with a blow. And that the will to do it was there no one had any doubt. Had not Shiner recently boasted that he had once done ninety days for flattening out the chief yeoman of the *Pugnacious*. Wright was not a man who ordinarily feared consequences, least of all when his anger was aroused.

But the blow never came. Something even stronger than his bull rage had suddenly come uppermost in Shiner's mind; a flash of recollection. Shiner wanted to go ashore on Thursday evening more than he had ever wanted anything in his life. And as he reflected for a moment it became clear to him that if he struck the leading hand it was quite certain that he would not go ashore. Accordingly he dropped his hands; and, lest those hands should act in opposition to his reason, he deliberately stepped back a pace or two.

"All right. Blast yer!" The effort of renunciation did not lessen his anger. On the contrary.

"BLAST YER!"

He turned round and lurched along the mess-deck.

to the foot of the ladder. Before ascending, he looked backward, and shook his fist.

"You ain't through; don't you think it." His voice rose to a passionate roar. "Ye bilge-wipin' burgoo-eatin' bastard. I'll get ye."

Shiner emerged from the dockyard gates carrying a small parcel, and hopped nimbly on to a crowded tramcar. His visits to the shore had not been very frequent of late, and they were almost invariably confined to one or more of the pubs in Chatham. On this occasion, however, he had resolved to give pubs a wide berth for the time being. His thirst, he told himself, he could attend to later.

He got off the tramcar at the Rochester end of Chatham, and then inquired of a pedestrian the way to get to Bollard Lane. He found he had not very far to go, and in a few minutes he arrived there. He looked carefully at the numbers on the doors, and finally went up to number five and knocked. The door was opened by Mr. Hackett.

"Come in, Mr. Wright," he said heartily.

He led the way into the small sitting-room.

"This is my wife," he said. "Mr. Wright; come ashore from the *Marathon*. We know a shipmate o' yours."

Mrs. Hackett shot the visitor an appraising glance. Her eyes rested on Shiner's uncomely countenance for a second or two as she shook hands, and then they flashed to the sleeve of his jumper, where they speedily took in the absence of either rating or good-conduct badges.

"Pleased to meet you," she said, not too warmly.

Shiner placed his parcel on the sideboard, and laid his cap alongside it.

"I 'ad a cousin in the Navy," Mrs. Hackett informed him. "'E's retired now. 'E was a"—she rolled out the phrase with impressive sonorousness—"a gunnery instructor."

"Oh, aye. They calls 'em gunner's mates on a ship."

"A gunnery instructor," she repeated. "'E 'ad officers learnin' under 'im sometimes."

"Sit down, Mr. Wright," said Hackett briskly. The table was laid for tea. The two men sat at the table, and Mrs. Hackett brought in the teapot.

During tea Mr. Hackett did most of the talking. His wife occasionally contributed an item, most often some incident relative to her cousin, the retired gunnery instructor. Shiner ate his bread-and-butter and cake, and drank his tea, and said little beyond a responsive "Ah" or "Aye". Once Mrs. Hackett put to Shiner a question that had been bubbling up in her mind ever since they had sat down.

"You ain't a petty officer, are yer?"

"No, I ain't," he replied explosively. Then he added, after a pause: "Me face don't fit."

Mrs. Hackett looked at the face that didn't fit, as if such a survey might indicate the possibility of suitable adaptations.

"Well, they can't all be petty officers," said Mr. Hackett sagely.

Shiner made no reply.

After tea the two men sat one on each side of the

fireplace, and lit pipes. After he had lit his own pipe Shiner got up from his chair and took the parcel from the sideboard. Unwrapping the cover, he presented it without a word to his host. It was a two-pound prick of Navy tobacco.

Hackett received the gift with every indication of surprised gratitude, although it must be said that he had eyed the parcel pretty frequently during tea.

"Why, that's real good of you, Mr. Wright," he said. "Real good of you. Real kind, I should say."

Shiner grunted. He sat down again, his knees wide apart, and remained for a long time leaning forward, his eyes on the floor, frequently clasping and unclasping his large tattooed hands. His hosts began to suspect that there was something on his mind. Sure enough there was, and it came out before long. He shuffled his feet, opened his mouth two or three times, and closed it again.

Then, in a voice that sounded like a tip-up wagon discharging a cargo of ballast, he said:

"I ain't seen Renie this evening. Where's Renie?"

"She's out," said Mrs. Hackett promptly.

"Why, Renie?" said Mr. Hackett with much more deliberation. "Why, she ain't in."

"Won't be 'ome till after ten," his wife put in. "Her young man's meeting 'er at 'er place, and taking 'er to tea, and Barnards afterwards."

"Oh," Shiner ejaculated. "Ah."

"And oo might 'er young man be?" he asked after a pause.

"Well, as a matter of fact," Hackett began, "'e's

one o' your—." He caught the eye of his wife. She was making dumb movements with her mouth, which nevertheless conveyed to her husband the sentence: "Dry up, you fathead."

"He's quite a nice young fellow," she said hurriedly. "But I don't suppose you'll see 'im; not to-night, anyway. You got to be back to your ship, of course."

Shiner made no reply, but gazed moodily into the fireplace. One afternoon about a month earlier Shiner had made the acquaintance of Hackett in the public bar of the "Bower Anchor". He had met him two or three times since, the last time being on the previous Tuesday outside the Town Hall. On that occasion the bargee was accompanied by his daughter Renie. The young lady had immediately captivated the fancy of the bluejacket, who had forthwith forsworn booze for an indefinite period. This short acquaintance was the cause of his visit to the house in Bollard Lane this evening.

To Hackett's breezy but indefinite invitation to "come 'ome one afternoon and 'ave tea," Shiner had responded that he might; and when Renie had looked at his cap tally, and smiled and nodded, he had said: "Right-o, I will. What about Thursday?"

Hackett had agreed right away, and the appointment had loomed large in Shiner's imagination ever since.

And now? It was truly a most depressing anticlimax.

Shiner sat for some time moodily contemplating the fire-grate. Suddenly he rose to his feet.

"Must be goin' now," he said, reaching for his cap. "Thank ye."

"Well," said Hackett, "if you must, you must, I suppose. You'll come an' see us again sometimes, I suppose?"

"Good-bye," said Mrs. Hackett. Shiner made a perfunctory adieu and departed.

As he walked slowly down the main road his thoughts were concentrated on a futile picture of Renie's lover. Somehow he hoped he was on the big side, not too big, but just big enough not to run away. He glanced occasionally at his big fists.

A goodly number of people were moving in the entrance of Barnard's Music-hall. Dotted here and there throughout the throng were several white-crowned caps and blue jean collars. Shiner, lurching slowly along on the opposite side of the road, barely noticed these people, until his yes lighted on something that made him bring up, every nerve taut. What he saw was a frock of Pompeian red—a colour that was fixedly impressed on his mind. He knew that frock; he had seen it only once before; but he knew the wearer. He stood still for a moment, and as he gazed he became aware that another familiar form was walking slowly beside her, a bluejacket whose face he knew. A half-gasp of surprised wonder, and then black rage enshrouded Shiner's heart as he recognized the sailor on whose arm the girl rested, for it was none other than his shipmate and messmate, his opponent of the fag incident—Acting Leading Stoker Wilson.

Shiner bounded across the road, but before he

reached the entrance the two were well inside the theatre. Well; he'd wait until they came out. For a time he had thoughts of going inside himself. No; he'd sit in a pub till they came out. That was the obvious thing for him to do. Accordingly he made his way to a favourite haunt of his not far away, and there he drank pint after pint, and passed through the various stages of inebriation proper to his type—surliness, self-pity, maudlin sentiment, hilarity, argumentativeness, ferocity, and blear-eyed wonder.

At chucking-out time a couple of potmen helped him on to his feet, placed his cap on his head, and piloted him to the door. He gave little trouble. He made an ineffectual search among his apparel for an elephant's tusk which he intimated he wished to present to one of them, and tried unsuccessfully to embrace the other. When they got him outside he announced in an inarticulate voice that he was "not too good to shake 'ands with no bloody man", a sentiment that changed somewhat suddenly, when the door was barred on him, to a threat to smash the deadlights of the something, something sons of so on and so forth on the other side of the door.

Shiner did not return to the ship that night, nor yet on the following morning. He spent the remainder of his cash on a final burst, downed two members of the Naval patrol that tried to make him prisoner, sobered up somewhat in the evening, and steered himself unaided to the *Marathon*, where he reported himself to the ship's corporal.

CHAPTER XXX

THE MIDDLE WATCH

ENGINEER-LIEUTENANT COLLINS walked into Number One Stokehold, glanced quickly at the steam-pressure gauge, and tapped the pipe with his fingers.

"Let me see your fires. Open that door."

Second-Class Stoker Mason snapped open the furnace door; the engineer stooped down and looked inside.

"Why, you've practically nothing there. Let me see the others."

"Whatever have you been doing? Where's the petty officer? Who's the petty officer in charge of the watch?"

"Wilson."

The engineer turned to a stoker who was engaged in smearing boiled oil on the exterior surface of an empty furnace of an adjacent boiler.

"Go and find Leading Stoker Wilson, and tell him I want to see him at once."

It was three bells in the forenoon. Tug was in charge of the forenoon auxiliary watch, and Mason was his boiler-room watch-keeper. Tug was stooping before a distiller pump in the engine-room when one of the day-work hands touched him on the shoulder.

"Jumper wants yer in the stoke'old."

Mason was sullenly slinging coal into a furnace when Tug arrived.

"What's the meaning of this, Wilson?" the Engineer demanded as soon as he appeared. "I find the steam down to one hundred—and dropping still further. And there's hardly any fire. How long have you been away from the stokehold?"

"About twenty minutes or more, sir. May've been a bit longer. I've had some trouble with the evaporators."

"What trouble?"

The engineer did not listen to the reply. He turned to the stoker, who was shovelling in coal without much discrimination.

"That'll do; that'll do," he said testily. He turned again to Tug.

"You really must keep an eye on that man. He doesn't seem to have the slightest idea what to do. Don't leave him alone with the boiler for more than five minutes in future. Keep very bright fires, not too heavy for a bit. I'll have a talk with you later on."

The engineer departed fuming to the engine-room. Tug, exasperated, turned to Mason.

"Gimme that shovel. Now find a quiet corner in that there bunker, and die, for God's sake."

"Don't leave him for more than five minutes! How the hell can I help leaving 'im? I can't be in two places at once."

Truly it was hard luck. A few more days and he would have completed his six months' probation before being rated leading stoker. An inefficient

distiller-pump had necessitated his absence from the stokehold, and this ham-handed son of a gun had let him down, and probably jammed his promotion. Savagely he seized a slice and jabbed it through each of the fires.

His interview with the senior engineer later in the day did not conduce to his happiness. He came away from the engineer's office with the distinct impression that his rating was in jeopardy. The officer had passed sundry strictures on what he considered Tug's incompetence, and wound up by informing him that he would have to consider whether he could confirm him in his rating.

As for Mason, that poor addle-pated gob had been completely overwhelmed by the storm of abuse and threats that the engineer, in a cultured, though menacing voice, had bestowed upon him.

When Tug returned to his mess, one of the first persons he saw was Shiner Wright. That injured person had just returned on board. He was nearly sober, and so far communicative as to recount to a couple of listeners his last adventures before returning to the ship. On Tug's appearance, however, he abruptly closed the discussion, and turned away. He took down his ditty-box from the rack overhead, and sat down with it at the far end of the mess-table by the ship's side.

At that moment the regulating chief stoker made his appearance.

"Wright, you'll keep the middle watch to-night on the dynamos."

Shiner grunted.

The chief stoker repeated the order for Tug's benefit.

"Shiner Wright's keepin' the middle watch with you on the dynamos."

Shiner shot Tug a sidelong glance, and then turned his eyes to the inside of his open ditty-box. He sat gazing at the inside for a long while, but what he saw was not the comb and brush, the thumbed letters, the stub of pencil, the few shells, but—Tug Wilson's face. Framed in the box-lid before him was a picture of Number One Stokehold, from the floor-plates of which Tug's kicked and battered face looked upward with sightless eyes.

Tug went into the stokehold at midnight to take over the middle watch. Petty Officer Small, from whom he took over, was just closing the damper of number two furnace.

"Number two O.K. for cleaning," he said, as he opened the door of the furnace for his relief to see inside. "Start the vaps at four bells."

Tug nodded, and glanced at the steam-pressure gauge. Then he looked inside the other furnaces one after the other. The fires were burning brightly, and a warm, red glow came from their ashpits.

"How's the coal?"

"Started on the starboard bunker. All O.K. there. You got a running bunker."

Small departed, and Tug looked round for his boiler-room watch-keeper. Mason was standing by the bunker-door breaking up large chunks of coal with a mawl,

"Come on, my son; jump to it. Get number two cleaned, and work all three up. We're starting the vaps at four bells."

Mason dropped the mawl, and came forward. There was a light of unusual brightness in his eyes. "Been having a birthday," thought Tug. "Wonder where he got the booze from."

"Aye; work 'em up," responded Mason in a thick voice. "I'll work 'em up. By Gawd, I'll work 'em up."

He set to work with ferocious energy, drew out the dying embers of number two, and slung fresh coal on the fire-bars. After finishing on number two he began to "work up" the three fires. He was working with extraordinary energy.

"Go easy with that coal," Tug intervened. "They're quite heavy enough. Keep 'em like that."

Mason gazed resentfully at Tug, and then at the furnace he had just been attending. Then he strode to the bunker-door and commenced vigorously shovelling coal into a skid. Tug lit a short clay pipe, and went aft down the alley-way to the engine-room.

The distilling machinery was set going at two o'clock, as per instructions. The evaporator watch-keeper was a stoker named Geehan. In the engine-room was also Tug's enemy Shiner Wright, who watched the dynamo. Both of these men were reliable on duty, and Tug felt complete confidence in leaving them alone in the engine-room. Also it must be said that he had no great desire to be in Wright's company for longer than he could help. No word had passed between them since the latter

had returned to the ship, but the expression on Shiner's countenance whenever he glanced in Tug's direction boded no good for him.

As Tug was returning along the alley-way a sound, suggestive of a hammer striking heavy blows on metal, reached his ears. The sound ceased as he entered the stokehold.

Mason had been working up the fires with a vengeance. All the draught-plates had been removed, and a ruddy glare from the ash-pits stabbed the dully-lighted boiler-room. A strange silence obtruded—an unusual silence. Some familiar sound was missing.

The feed-pump!

What was wrong with the feed-pump? Its monotonous sighing throb had ceased.

And what was Mason up to there by the auxiliary feed-pump? Holding something behind him, he was panting, and beads of sweat showed on his forehead. There was an extraordinary expression on his face. He suddenly dropped the object he had been holding; it fell with a loud clatter on the plates. It was a heavy pricker bar.

But Tug's glance was directed less to Mason than to the auxiliary feed-pump behind him. Enshrouded in a cloak of steam vapour, it was none the less obvious to any eye that the pump was permanently out of action. Copper-pipes were bent and flattened, the brass-work was heavily dented, and the whole outfit looked as if it had been the victim of a savage assault. Subconsciously Tug turned his eyes to the main feed-pump. That also had received the same treatment.

It was Mason who had done this. The fellow, Tug now remembered, had acted once or twice of late in an incomprehensible manner. And now it was clear the man had gone clean off his chump; clean balmy; bughouse.

Tug turned and looked at the boiler. The steam-gauge showed more than 150 lbs. to the square inch—almost the limit of safety. The fires were immense. He looked at the gauge-glass. Not a drop of water showed.

Here was a calamity. And he, Tug, was responsible. A nice situation for a leading hand whose rating was already in jeopardy.

A hand grasped his shoulder; an arm was flung round his neck. Momentarily he had forgotten Mason. The madman was attacking him. The arm round his neck tightened its hold; the grip on his shoulder relaxed; the other arm went round his waist. He found himself held as in a vice. Powerless, he found himself being bent backward.

Despite his struggles he was slowly propelled towards the boiler. The barrel of the middle furnace was the lowest of the three; the bottom of the ash-pit was a little below the level of the floor-plates. A blistering heat assailed him as he drew near to the furnace. Down, slowly down, he was forced till his head was on a level with the bottom of the fire-grate. At that moment the appalling realization dawned on him that the maniac designed to thrust him into the ash-pit. Then frantic were his struggles to break the iron grip that held him. Terror gave him strength almost equal to that of the madman. Sweat ran from

him in streams. One arm he got free. Mason's legs were wide apart in order to make the most of his strength by achieving a firm foothold. Upward between those legs Tug jerked his elbow with all the force he could muster.

A sudden yelp of agony, and Mason sharply straightened himself. His head came in violent contact with the overhanging smoke-box. Stunned and staggering, his grip relaxed, and he reeled backward. Freed, Tug gathered the last of his expiring strength and caught his reeling opponent a vicious punch on the jaw, following it up with a kick in the stomach. That was the last effort of which he was capable. The stokehold began to pivot this way and that. He sank on one knee, and then flopped down across his prostrate and unconscious adversary.

And all the time the steam pressure rose, and the water in the boiler sank.

CHAPTER XXXI

SHINER TAKES A HAND

IN the engine-room Shiner Wright watched his dynamo. His sullen mood disclosed itself in his monosyllabic replies to the discursive remarks with which his watchmate, the evaporator watchkeeper, sought to relieve the tedium of the watch. As a matter of fact, most of Geehan's discourse was lost on Shiner. A few words here and there caught his ear.

" . . . I took my young lady to Barnard's . . . the chief entrance. . . . I said, 'I want two tickets for the Orchestreal Stalls.' . . . I said, 'My money's as good as anyone else's, ain't it?' . . . A lady said, 'Make room for that there sailor.' . . . Barnard's. . . ." Geehan droned on.

"*Barnard's.*" The name stuck in Shiner's mind. Other names kept cropping up there, too.

Barnard's . . . Renie . . . Tug Wilson . . . Renie . . . Wilson . . . Wilson.

Shiner's smouldering resentment was gradually fanned by his thoughts to a murderous hate. Wilson was for'ard there now. Then why not get him now? No one to interfere but a second-class dustman—a poor, wet, slab-sided runt.

"'E won't interfere. Gawd 'elp 'im if 'e does.

"I'll get 'im now, by Gawd.

"Say, Towney."

Geehan stopped the tale of his adventures.

"'Ullo."

"Keep yer eye on the dynamo fer a minute, will yer?"

"Sure."

Shiner stole for'ard to Number One Stokehold. His manner was furtively eager. The dull gleam reflected from the for'ard stokehold as he approached that place exhibited a particularly ugly look on his ugly face. If ever there was a potential murderer, it was Shiner Wright at that moment.

There was no sound in the stokehold; no scraping of a shovel, no clatter of clogged feet, no conversation. As Shiner entered, the stokehold appeared deserted of human beings.

"Where's the bas——?" he began.

And then he saw.

Instinctively his eye went to the steam- and water-gauges. What he saw there galvanized him into almost frenzied activity. Shiner was first and foremost a naval stoker; and only one idea could occupy his bull brain in a situation of this kind. The fires must come out—and he must be quick about it. The peril was great indeed.

Leaping on to the low steel dam alongside the boiler, he grasped the wheel of the safety-valve spindle. A few vicious wrenches and the valve was permanently lifted. Down again, he seized and tugged at the damper chains. The dampers closed, he grabbed each of the bodies lying before the centre furnace and flung them indiscriminately out of the way.

In less time than it takes to tell he was before the first fire, drawing with a long rake the flaming masses from the furnace on to the plates. No friendly hose-pipe played on the fiery cataract that fell around his feet. Striving prodigiously, scorched, blistered, enveloped in smoke, with flaming embers heaped around him, this unprepossessing member of the black squad looked like some fire god of northern mythology. Two furnaces he emptied of their fiery contents; the third he had wellnigh emptied, too; the pointer of the steam-gauge was already beginning to crawl slowly back, when the fire-fighter became aware of figures descending the stokehold ladder. It was the watch relief.

Abruptly he dropped his iron and darted along the alleyway to his dynamo in the engine-room.

Tug opened his eyes and found himself gazing upward through a smoky atmosphere at the fan engine at the top of the stokehold. He rolled over and staggered to his feet.

What was up? Why all this smoke, and these heaps of red and smoking coals lying about? One or two human shapes showed blurred to his vision. He tried to pull himself together and gazed at the boiler stupidly. Someone had been drawing the fires. A rake lay on the plates at his feet. He stooped to pick it up. It was hot, but he held it. Two of the furnaces were empty, except for a few dying embers; the third still contained a small quantity of disordered fire. With no very clear idea of what he was doing,

he thrust the rake into the furnace and commenced to draw.

A hand touched him on the shoulder.

"All right, old son. You've done your share. Take a spell." The hand patted him on the back.

The rake was taken from his hands and he walked dizzily to the bulkhead, leaned heavily against it, and tried to think.

On the quarter-deck of the *Marathon* request men and defaulters fell in. The captain stood with a small table in front of him. Beside him were the commander, the engineer-commander, and one or two officers. Before the table, on one side, stood the master-at-arms, a large book in his hand.

"Acting-Leading Stoker Wilson, to be rated Leading Stoker."

Tug stepped forward and saluted. The captain turned to the engineer-commander; a few sentences passed between them. The captain nodded and turned to the request man.

"Wilson, you're a very gallant fellow. Request granted."

"Request granted. About turn," bawled the master-at-arms.

A few minutes later First-Class Stoker Wright stepped forward and faced the Captain.

". . . Eighteen hours absent without leave. Drunk. Assaulted the patrol." Etcetera, etcetera. The jaunty, in a crisp monotone, recounted Shiner's misdeeds and shortcomings. The commander also had a few observations to make.

The captain set his face into an expression of more than quarter-deck sternness.

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